

HTTYD: Legends are Born

by Cottonmouth25

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Summary: Scores of dragons and a savage island full of maniacs ensure that Hiccup has his hands full these days. Luckily, his friends are there to help him with all of these problems and become the stuff of Viking legend. A re-telling of the movie and TV series - with the occasional twist. Rated T for mild language and romance. (This story has been discontinued, remake has been published.)

1. Life on Berk

****Greetings, and many great hellos!****

****Whew, another fanfic? Yep, I'm pretty busy, with three on the go at once. As usual, we have some stuff to go over before I beginâ€¦****

****One, this fanfic is based entirely upon the story of the movie "How to Train Your Dragon," as well as some of the episodes of the TV series "Dragons: Riders of Berk".****

****Two, as always, I'm incorporating some twists into this story â€" new dragons, new characters, and of course, the appearance of yours truly as a supporting character.****

****Three, if you haven't before, I highly recommend you watch the movie before you read this. It's excellent, one of the best movies out there!****

****So sit back, relax, and read on into the world of dragons!****

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I showed the newcomer to a chair, in which she sat down comfortably. Poking at the fire in the centre of the room, I looked out of the

nearby window, giving her enough space so she could see as well. It was a magnificent view.

"This is Berk," I said to her. She joined me at the window, long brown hair shining in the moonlight. The sword she carried clinked audibly as she walked.

"It's five days North of hopeless," I continued, "and a few degrees South of freezing to death. It's located solidly on the Meridian of Misery." The girl, about my age from the look of her, raised her eyebrows. "That's encouraging," she commented sarcastically, and I let out a reluctant chuckle.

"It's my village," I protested. "In a word â€" sturdy. It's been here for, let's seeâ€" I paused to think, then began anew. "It's been here for seven generations, but every single building is new. We've got fishing, hunting, and a charming view of the sunsets."

The girl smiled to herself, then turned to me. "It sounds like a nice place," she complimented me, as if I had built it with my own hands â€" which wasn't likely, especially for me, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third. Or as everyone liked calling me, "Hiccup the Useless".

"It is," I agreed. "But the only problems are the pests."

Outside, herds of sheep grazed peacefully on the moonlit lawns. Suddenly, a dark shape swooped down from out of the blackness, plucking one of the sheep off of the ground. Its neighbor looked unconcerned, and simply moved over to the patch where the other had been eating.

"What pests?" asked the girl as I led her to the door. "You see, most places have mice or mosquitoes," I said, turning the handle. "We haveâ€" I

I opened the door, and a huge beast was revealed hovering above the ground just outside. Noticing us, it spat a huge wave of fire in our direction, and I barely managed to close the door before we were incinerated. I turned to the girl, noticing the surprise and fear in her eyes. I finished my last statement in a whisper. "â€" Dragons."

The fire began to spread from the door to the walls, and then made its way inside. I scrambled out of the window, gesturing for my new friend to follow. She did so with ease, leaping out with only her hand gripping the windowsill for leverage.

"Most people would leave," I continued to speak. "Not us â€" we're Vikings. We haveâ€" stubbornness issues." This was proven as we saw a man leap off of a cliff to rescue a sheep from the claws of another dragon, while another pounded on a dragon's nose as it flew around with him in its jaws. Indeed, the sky was now filled with dragons of all kinds.

"My name is Hiccup," I said, motioning for the girl to follow me. Before she could reply, I rolled my eyes. "Great name, I know. But it's not the worst. Parents believe a hideous name will frighten off gnomes and trolls â€" like our charming Viking demeanor wouldn't do that."

I tripped, falling on my back. A Viking warrior suddenly stooped down and howled in my face, then gave me a cheery, "Mornin'!" I rolled my eyes again as the girl helped me back up.

"Pleasure to meet you, Hiccup," she grunted. "My name's Snaketail." I smiled and nodded in recognition. Once again, I gestured for her to follow as I ran down into the village itself. As we ran, Vikings all over yelled to me, "What're you doin' here?" and "Get back inside!" Sighing, I turned a corner, only to have a passing dragon nearly barbecue me as it strafed the ground with a blast of flame.

A hand flashed out and snagged the back of my shirt. I found myself staring at the bearded face of the biggest Viking of them all. "Hiccup!" he shouted. "What is he doing â€" what are you doing out here?! Get inside!"

He sent me on my way, and I continued to run, Snaketail right behind me. "Who was that?" she asked, not out of breath at all. I replied, "That's Stoick the Vast, chief of the tribe. They say that when he was a baby, he popped a dragon's head right off of its shoulders."

She looked at me skeptically. "You believe that?" she asked me. "Yes, I do," I said with absolute certainty.

Avoiding another fire blast from a dragon overhead, I ducked into the building that I was hoping to find. It was a blacksmith's workshop, and was already occupied.

"Oh, nice of yeh to join the party!" said the large Viking who was busy at the anvil. One of his hands was missing, replaced by a large hammer. "I thought you'd been carried off!"

Pulling Snaketail through the door, I replied, "Who, me? No, I'm waaaay to muscular for their taste. They wouldn't know what to do with all this." I flexed my pathetically skinny arms, trying to show at least a little muscle.

"Well, they need toothpicks, don' they?" the Viking asked jokingly as he replaced his hammer with a set of tongs.

I opened the window to the forge, to be met with a boatload of weapons in need of repair. "The meathead with attitude and interchangeable hands is Gobber," I breathlessly told Snaketail, who was waiting patiently. "I've been his apprentice ever since I was little â€" well, littler." She stepped over to help me lift the weapons onto the hot coals.

Outside, there were shouts â€" battle cries as well as cries of panic. I looked through the window and saw a dragon blast a house, setting it alight. "See?" I asked Snaketail, pointing at the destruction. "Old village, lots and lots of new houses." She smirked and suddenly swung her head around, apparently catching sight of something.

"Who are they?" she asked, pointing to the group of teenagers who had rushed onto the scene to put out the new fire. "Oh, them?" I asked, and when she nodded, I continued, "The short muscular one is my cousin Snotlout, the flabby one is Fishlegs, then there are the

twins, Ruffnut and Tuffnutâ€|"

The group of four was rushing to put out the fire with buckets of water. Ruffnut and Tuffnut started fighting over the same bucket, only to be knocked aside by the appearance of another. The new girl successfully put out a small fire, only to have a dragon reignite it, framing her magnificently in an explosion of red and orange flame.

"And that's Astrid," I sighed, as she and the others rushed off for more water. I was honestly the first one to admit that I was head over heels in love with her â€" but me being me, there was little chance that she would ever even know I existed.

"Oh, their jobs are so much cooler," I commented, and leaned out the window for a better look at where they were going.

Suddenly, Gobber hoisted me away from the window and plonked me down next to Snaketail. "Oh, would you let me out, please?!" I exclaimed. "I need to make my mark!"

Gobber snorted. "You've made plenty of marks," he told me, jabbing me gently with his tongs. "All in the wrong places." He suddenly noticed Snaketail quietly observing. "And who are you?" he asked. She shook his hand enthusiastically and simply said, "I'm a newcomer â€" Hiccup was just showing me around."

Before Gobber could continue the conversation, I jumped back in. "Please, two minutes," I pleaded. "I'll kill a dragon, and my life will get infinitely better. I might even get a date!"

It was Gobber's turn to roll his eyes as he made a list on his fingers: "Yeh can't lift a hammer, yeh can't swing an axe, and yeh can't even throw one o' these!" He held up a bola and threw it at a passing dragon to demonstrate. The weapon snared the dragon's legs and caused it to plummet to the ground with a dull thud.

"Ah," I said, moving over to a wooden contraption on wheels â€" one of my many inventions. "This'll throw it for me," I finished smugly, just before it unfolded and shot another bola at a Viking standing outdoors. He hit the ground with a grunt, unconscious nearly instantly.

Gobber looked like he had enough. "Now this right here is what I'm talking about! If you want to get out there and fight dragons, you need to stop allâ€| this." He gestured with his hand and tongs.

"You just gestured to all of me!" I said, appalled. Snaketail began to giggle on the sidelines. "Yes, that's it!" Gobber said in a satisfied way. "Stop bein' all of you!"

I made an attempt to look intimidating, something that didn't exactly come naturally. "You, sir, are playing a dangerous game," I warned ominously. "Keeping this much rawâ€| Viking-nessâ€| contained â€" there'll be consequences!"

Gobber didn't look convinced, naturally. "I'll take my chances," he said, bored. Then he handed me a dulled sword and ordered, "Sword. Sharpen. Now."

I groaned and led Snaketail to another corner of the smithy. "One day I'll get out there," I muttered to her. "Because killing a dragon is _everything_ around here."

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****Battleground****

A Deadly Nadder head is sure to get me at least noticed. A flock of multicolored, bird-like dragons squawked and gurgled as they surrounded the sheep barn, looking for a way in. Deadly Nadders had fire breath that could instantly melt through metal and a tail filled with long, poisonous spikes that could be launched at will.

I guess I wouldn't be so disappointed if I could get myself a Scauldron. A fat green dragon waddled comically toward a pair of Vikings, obviously not used to moving on land. Gallons of water sloshed in its stomach, and it sprayed it out from its pelican-like mouth " the water was steaming heavily, and hot enough to melt flesh off a person's bones.

Gronckles are tough. Taking down one of those would definitely get me a girlfriend. A couple of portly dragons were squatting in front of a rack of drying fish, scooping them up in their broad mouths. When they had filled themselves up, they took off, flapping their wings like giant bumblebees.

I hope I get lucky enough to kill a Whispering Death. The ground in front of the forge heaved, and a serpentine dragon emerged, multiple rows of teeth rotating rapidly as it dislodged some stray rocks and soil between them. Before it could attack, it was driven off by a party of Viking warriors " not before it smoked one with a ring of fire, shot from its monstrous mouth.

Good Thor, a Thunderdrum or Timberjack would set me up just fine in terms of popularity. A couple of dragons soared by overhead " one flat and stingray-like, with a whiplike tail and a gigantic, circular maw. The other was all wings, with a thin, snaky body and huge, ribbed wings that spanned at least thirty feet to the sides and twenty feet to the back of the dragon. They both demolished a house " the Timberjack sliced right through the roof, and the Thunderdrum blasted the innards with a sonic scream that devastated everything caught in its wake.

A Hideous Zippleback? Exotic " two heads, twice the status. A dual-headed dragon blew a building to smithereens " one head sprayed flammable gas all over the vicinity, and the other ignited it with a spark or two from the back of its throat. It flapped off, its destructive work done.

Two heads are enough, actually. I don't really think I could kill a Devious Snaptrapper. A gigantic dragon joined the Zippleback in flight, its four flower-like heads trailing in front of it. Devious Snaptrappers were just that " devious. They normally lurked in forests, lying in wait for Vikings by imitating a plant and luring them with their sweet-smelling saliva, and then swallowing them whole.

_And then, Snaketail, there's the Monstrous Nightmare. Only the very best Vikings go after those. They have this nasty habit of lighting

themselves on fire._ As Stoick the Vast stood at his battle station atop a massive catapult, he suddenly felt heat and light erupt from beneath him. Looking down, he saw that the structure had begun to burn rapidly, courtesy of a Monstrous Nightmare. Its flaming body burst through the wood, ending up with its reptilian muzzle right next to him.

Taking his large hammer in hand, Stoick repeatedly beat the dragon on its horned face. It snapped its huge jaws at him, the long, thin fangs missing him by inches. Deciding that there was better prey than this, the Monstrous Nightmare flew off, the fires that wrapped its body extinguishing.

"Are there any dragons that are tougher than the Monstrous Nightmare?" Snaketail asked, both excited and a little scared. I replied in the affirmative. There was indeed one dragon out there that was much rarer and much tougher than the Nightmare â€" the flightless, hellish Blundertail.

A trio of dragons â€" a Nadder, Zippleback, and Gronckle â€" clumsily flapped over the village, with a huge object clutched in their talons. With grunts of relief, they dropped the object into the village square. It landed with a tremendous thud, and Vikings fled in the dozens from it.

The object revealed itself to be a sleeping Blundertail. Its front legs, which resembled lobsters' claws, as well as its two back legs extended out from where it had tucked them underneath it. It raised its scorpion-like tail and roared, revealing tons of thick teeth in its boulder-crushing jaws. Blasting a house with a searing bolt of venomous fire from its tail, it scuttled deeper into the village, bringing with it death and destruction.

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****Gobber's Forge****

I put the sword down and handed it off to Gobber. Turning to Snaketail, I went on, "But the ultimate prize is the dragon that no one's ever seen. We call it theâ€|"

All of a sudden, there was a piercing screech that rang out above the noise of battle, getting steadily louder and louder. "Night Fury!" someone called in a panic. "Get down!" yelled someone else in a panic. All of the Vikings ducked, and a huge burst of blue flame shot down from the sky and exploded, taking an entire catapult down. There was a whistling noise as the unknown dragon shot by overhead, too fast and too dark to be seen.

I continued in a whisper to Snaketail, now thoroughly spooked. "This dragon never steals food, never reveals itself, and" - another catapult exploded â€" "never misses. No one has ever killed a Night Fury. That's why I'm going to be the first."

Gobber suddenly abandoned his tongs and replaced them with a sharp axe. "Man the fort, Hiccup," he ordered. "They need me out there." Just before he stepped outside, he told us, "Stay. Put. There." I just looked at him. "Yeh know what I mean." Then with a battle cry, he limped into the fray on his leg and a half.

As soon as he left my line of sight, I grabbed my homemade weapon and wheeled it to the door. "Let's go kill a dragon," I called to Snaketail, and rushed outside, towing my invention before me like an oddly shaped wheelbarrow.

Soon, the two of us had reached Berk's outskirts. It was completely quiet, and there were no dragons in sight. I rapidly set up my weapon, which I called "the Mangler". Snaketail stood silently beside me, her hand on the hilt of her sword. "Give me something to shoot at, give me something to shoot at!" I muttered, pointing the Mangler's targeting scope at an old, abandoned catapult.

We waited. There was no movement in the skies " or was there? I suddenly saw part of the night sky move, blocking out the stars as it flew. Instinctively, I knew that this was the dragon that I sought. The Night Fury.

A screech rang out as it prepared to strike. Diving towards the catapult, the Night Fury's shriek reached its peak as it spat a bolt of blue fire straight at the structure. The flame hit its mark dead on, tearing through the wood and exploding violently. Desperately, I fired a bola at the dragon, already waiting for the realization that my shot had missed to hit me.

But wait " there was an animalistic scream, and the sight of the glinting rocks tied to the bola disappearing off into the distant forest! "I hit it," I breathed. "Yes, I hit it!" Snaketail cheered and drew her sword victoriously.

"Did anyone else see that?" I called out, only to see a huge dragon clamber up over a hill and land next to me. "Is that a?" Snaketail began. "Yep," I replied. "Monstrous Nightmare." A searing roar tore from its throat, and we both ran as fast as our legs could carry us, back for the village.

Snaketail managed to hide behind a ruined building, but the dragon cut off my planned escape route with a blast of sticky fire, forcing me to keep running. Finally, I managed to hide behind a giant torch, and the Nightmare's next blast hit the torch instead of me.

I cautiously poked my head back around the torch, now going up in flames, trying to see if the dragon was still there. It wasn't " but what I didn't realize was that it was right behind me, ready to bite my head off.

But it never got the chance. A sudden movement caught my eye, and I turned to witness a shocking sight. Stoick the Vast had appeared from nowhere and was now battling the dragon in one-on-one combat. The Monstrous Nightmare shot a pathetic blast of its fire, which didn't even reach him. The next blast was nothing more than a few embers.

"You're all out," growled Stoick, before letting loose with a series of kicks and punches. The Nightmare, deciding not to risk a fight without any of its fire left, flew away past Snaketail, who was cautiously approaching me, and into the distance.

Then Stoick turned his attention towards the torch, which had been severely weakened by the Monstrous Nightmare's fire. It snapped, then fell to the ground. I knew that I had been clearly revealed standing

behind it. "And there's one more thing that you ought to know" I muttered to Snaketail.

The great bowl of fire that sat upon the torch dropped off and rolled away, doing major damage as it went. Vikings and dragons alike scrambled to get away from the runaway torch. In particular, a captured group of Deadly Nadders managed to rip themselves free of their netting and take off, each with a sheep in its talons.

The dragons, by this time, had begun to fly off with their prey. As the sky became lighter as dawn approached, I was being fixed in Stoick's firm gaze. I sighed and apologized.

"Sorry" Dad.

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Ah, a nice, fresh start, don't you think? Of course, when dragons are involved, the start isn't usually fresh. I was thinking more "well-done", and maybe burnt to a crisp occasionally. You catch my drift.

Whatever the case, we get a nice appearance of Snaketail, an OC that I just randomly decided to put in the story. I smell an eventual love triangle

I hope you all like my addition of the Blundertail, it was an idea I had a while ago and wanted to incorporate into this story.

I hope to write Chapter 2 soon! Please review, and see you all then.

2. The Night Fury

Hello again. When we last left off, Hiccup was about to get heavily reprimanded by his father "none other than Stoick the Vast himself. We wouldn't want to miss THAT, now would we?"

wolflover595: There will definitely be a Skrill later on in the story. I can give it a somewhat similar name to the one you requested, because that name isn't really" intimidating enough for such a deadly dragon.

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I just stood there, waiting for my dad to say something. He remained silent. I hated it when he did that. I shuffled my feet and said rapidly, "Okay but I hit a Night Fury."

His response was to grab me by the back of my coat and haul me off to Odin knows where. I protested all the way there. "It's not like the last few times, Dad! I mean I really, actually hit it! You guys were busy and I had a very clear shot! It went down just off Raven Point, so let's get a search party out there before it"

Then Stoick boomed, "STOP! Just" stop." I went quiet and waited for him to finish. I didn't have to wait long. "Every time you step outside, disaster follows! Can you not see that I have bigger

problems? Winter is almost here and I have an entire village to feed!"

I glanced quickly at the crowd that had gathered and tried to relieve the tension by saying, "Well between you and me, the village could do with a little less feeding, know what you think?" There were murmurs of annoyance amongst the adults.

"This isn't a joke, Hiccup!" Stoick said sharply. "Why can't you follow the simplest orders?" I hastened to defend myself. "I can't stop myself! I see a dragon and I have to justâ€¦ kill it. You know, it's who I am, Dad."

Stoick finally sighed. "You're many things, Hiccup," he said quietly. "But a dragon-slayer is not one of them. Now get back to the house." He turned to Gobber, who had joined us in the middle of our argument. "Make sure he gets there," he ordered him. "I have a mess to clean up."

Gobber led me off, with Snaketail trailing behind awkwardly. We passed Astrid and the rest, all laughing and otherwise making me feel miserable. "Quite the performance," smirked Tuffnut, his twin sister snickering in the background. I glared.

"I have never seen anyone mess up so badly," Snotlout chuckled. "You know, that helped!" I said in a bored voice, "Thank you, thank you. I was trying."

Snaketail stayed behind as Gobber pushed Snotlout to the ground, still laughing nervously. I heard the group start talking to Snaketail, which was fine with me. I'm sure that she'd be able to find her way around Berk on her own, or at least without those idiots leading her.

As we approached my house, burnt in places from the dragon attack, I said dejectedly, "I really hit one." Gobber didn't reply.

I went on, "He never listens." This time Gobber responded, "It runs in the family." Ignoring this, I continued, "And when he does, it's with this disappointed scowl, like someone skimped on meat in his sandwich."

Stopping in front of the house, I paraded around, doing a pretty good impression of my father. "Excuse me, barmaid! I'm afraid you've brought me the wrong offspring! I ordered an extra-large boy with beefy arms, extra guts, and glory on the side! This here, this is talkin' fishbone!"

Gobber tried to calm me down with a gesture and a chuckle. "Now yeh're thinkin' about this all wrong," he said. "It's not so much whatcha look like, it's what's inside that he can't stand."

Like that helped. "Thank you for summing that up," I said sarcastically.

Gobber went on in a more serious tone, "Look, the point is, stop trying so hard to be something you're not." I sighed resignedly and moaned, "I just want to be one of you guysâ€¦" Then I opened the door and walked inside.

But the instant Gobber left, I snuck out the back and headed for the woods. I wanted to check something out.

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****Great Hall (Stoick's POV)****

"Either we finish them or they'll finish us!" I proclaimed to the rest of the Vikings. We were gathered around the central fire pit in the Great Hall, where we always went to discuss our problems and how to solve them. Needless to say, most of the time we were here to complain about the dragon infestation.

"It's the only way we'll be rid of them," I continued, slamming a hand down on the table. "If we find the nest and destroy it, the dragons will leave. They'll find another home." I took a knife and plunged it into a region on the map in front of me, a foggy, uncharted area where the dragon nest was said to be. "One more search, before the ice sets in!"

Someone on the other side called, "Those ships never come back!" There were mutterings of agreement from everyone else. "We're Vikings!" I said exasperatedly. "It's an occupational hazard! Now who's with me?"

No one spoke up, although there was an increase in the muttering. "All right," I decided, standing to my full height. "Those who stay will look after Hiccup." Everyone instantly raised their hand to volunteer. "Now that's more like it," I said, half to myself.

As everyone left, I walked up to Gobber, who was sitting near the back of the room. "I'll pack me undies," he said, getting ready to leave as well. "No," I told him. "I need you to stay and train some new recruits."

He rolled his eyes at me and fiddled with his tankard-arm. "Perfect," he muttered. "And while I'm busy, Hiccup can cover the stall! Molten steel, razor-sharp blades, lots of time to himselfâ€¦ what could possibly go wrong?"

I sighed. Sometimes it was difficult being the chief, especially when one of the biggest problems was that of my own son. "What do you propose to do with him, Gobber?" I asked. Much to my shock, he replied, "Put 'im in training."

I thought he was joking for a minute. "I'm serious," I told him. "So am I," he answered.

Now I was astonished. "He'll be killed before the first dragon's out of its cage," I did my best not to stutter. _Chiefs do not stutter_, I thought determinedly.

"Oh, yeh don't know that," Gobber said dismissively, going back to his drink. "I do, actually," I said. "No yeh don't," he retorted, to which I said again, "Yes, I do." He turned back to me and said with emphasis, "No, yeh don't!"

I started pacing. "You know what he's likeâ€¦ He doesn't listenâ€¦ he has the attention span of a sparrowâ€¦ I take him fishing and he goes hunting forâ€¦ for trolls!"

Gobber cut in emphatically, "Trolls exist! They steal yer socks. But only the left ones. What's with that?"

I started a speech. "When I was a boy" â€" Gobber rolled his eyes again and said under his breath, "Here we goâ€"|" â€" "My father told me to bash my head against a rock, and I did it. I thought he was crazy, but I did it anyway. And you know what happened?"

Gobber, who had lost the stone that he liked to carry in his empty tooth socket, guessed sarcastically with a lisp, "You gaw a heh-ache."

Ignoring this, I continued with my story. "That rock split in two. Itâ€" it taught me what a Viking can do, Gobber. He can crush mountains, level forests, tame seas! â€"Even as a boy, I knew what I was, what I had to becomeâ€" and Hiccup is not that boy."

There was silence from Gobber, before he said firmly, "Yeh can't stop 'im, Stoick. You can only prepare 'im." I considered this for a moment as he went on. "I know it seems hopeless, but the truth is, yeh won't always be around to protect 'im. He's going to get out there again! He's probably out there now!"

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****Berk Woods (Hiccup's POV)****

I peered intently at the little book I held in my hand. In it, I had sketched a simple map of the Berk woods, and was now trying to determine where the Night Fury had crashed. So far, I had mapped out over ten possible impact sites, and none had proven correct.

Scribbling angrily with my stick of charcoal, I resignedly snapped the book shut and put it away in the pocket of my jacket. "Oh, the gods hate me," I mumbled, walking aimlessly through the forest. "Some people lose their knife or their mug. No, not me! I manage to lose an entire dragon?!" I decided to take out my frustration on a tree branch in my way, slapping it with all of my might. It slapped me back, causing me to cringe.

Something made me stop and look. The tree that the branch belonged to had split in two, with one half standing upright, and the other bending down towards the ground. It looked as if the tree had been struck by lightning, except that it wasn't burnt.

There was something else that was suspicious. There was a huge track of plowed earth running beyond the tree and vanishing over the next hill. It was as if something had plunged out of the sky and violently skidded to a halt.

I decided to investigate. Hopping over the fallen tree, I followed the track of dirt and mud to the top of the hill. Rounding an exposed tree root, I turned back to the hill â€" and saw a black shape sitting in the middle of a clearing.

Instantly, I hit the ground by reflex, terrified that the dragon had noticed me. I didn't hear any reaction, so I cautiously peeked over the top of the hill. The Night Fury wasn't moving, as if it were

unconsciousâ€¦ or dead.

Gripping my knife with such force that my knuckles turned white, I ducked and ran as fast as I could for the nearest boulder. Pressing my back to it, I cautiously slid around it and risked another peek. The dragon hadn't moved a millimeter.

I suddenly felt a surge of courage. Boldly stepping up to the dragon, I took the time to examine it. It was pitch-black all over, with stubby talons and a finned head. Its wings were broad and quite majestic, even while pinned to its body with the bola I had shot at it. I noticed with a jolt that one of its tail fins had been severed.

"I did it," I murmured. "Oh, yes, thisâ€¦ this fixes everything! Yes, I have brought down this mighty beast" â€" placing my foot on the dragon's body, I threw myself against the boulder as it suddenly moved, kicking feebly at my touch.

Breathing hard, I saw the Night Fury regain its consciousness, taking long, deep breaths. I held my knife out in front of me, prepared to defend myself if it suddenly attacked. I gave the Night Fury the once-over, trying to determine where to strike in order to kill it. I suddenly got the feeling that I was being watched, and I found myself looking into the dragon's vivid green eyes.

We held each other's gaze for a few seconds; I was fascinated, and the dragon seemed curious. I quickly looked away and readied my knife. "I'm gonna kill you, dragon," I muttered. "Then I'mâ€¦ I'm gonna cut out your heart and give it to my father."

There was no response from the Night Fury. "I'm a Viking," I said simply, then glared at it. "I'm a Viking!" I repeated, raising my voice. Then, knife clutched in both of my hands, I held it high above my head, prepared to end the dragon's life with one stab.

But something made me stop. I once again looked into the Night Fury's eyes; they were wide, as if the dragon was afraid. They widened up a little more as the dragon waited in anticipation for what I would do.

Cringing, I squinted my eyes shut and once again raised my knife high. I heard the dragon's moan, and the gentle thud as its head slumped to the ground. It had given up, and was waiting for me to claim its life.

As for me, I was trying desperately to summon the courage to bring my blade down. Butâ€¦ I couldn't do it. No matter how hard I tried to forget, the image of the Night Fury's innocent, frightened eyes burned itself into my brain, forcing me to look into them once more.

Finally, I gave up, just as the dragon had. I let my hand drop to my side, still clutching the knife. "I did thisâ€¦" I whispered, voice heavy with guilt. I turned to leave, then glanced back at the helpless dragon. It was just lying there, waiting for its life to end. The pathetic sight made me suck in a breath in preparation for what I was going to do next.

I rushed back to the Night Fury's body and began cutting at the ropes

that bound it. I felt it tense as it realized what was going on. There were only three more ropes to cutâ€¦ Now twoâ€¦ now only oneâ€¦

And then it pounced on me, driving me to the ground and pinning me under its claws. Gasping for breath, I looked up into the dragon's face. No longer were its eyes wide and scared. Now they were narrowed and focused, and carrying with them an undercurrent of ferocity.

The eyes of a true predator.

We gazed at each other once more, this time with our positions switched â€" with the Night Fury standing over me, preparing to finish me off. It raised its head and snarled, and I braced myself for the pain and the darkness.

The dragon lowered its head and produced an ear-splitting screech that echoed in my ears long after it had dissipated. Then the Night Fury tore off into the woods, free once more. I saw its silhouette through the thickening mist as it suddenly careened into a tree. A second later, it was gone.

I numbly picked up my knife and pocketed it, then began my walk back to the village. However, five steps later, I slumped to the ground in a dead faint.

As I slept, I dreamt about the Night Fury that I had freed. _What have I done?_ I thought in my dreams.

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Well, this is the very first time I'm incorporating multiple points of view in a story. As this one goes on, you'll be seeing A LOT of them.

Anyway, when the next chapter comes out, we'll get to see Hiccup and the rest try miserably to kill a dragon! Please R+R, and see you soon!

3. Dragon Training

Oh, how I love the movie. I watched it again to help refresh my memory for this fanfic, even though I've pretty much memorized it already ;)

I'm beginning to think that this fanfic is going to be much longer than I anticipated, since there's a new episode of "Riders of Berk" every Thursday. Oh well, more imaginative stuff for me to cram in!

-.-.-.-.-

As quietly as I could, I opened the recently repaired door to my house and closed it just as quietly. My dad was hunched over the fire, his back to me, so I silently sneaked up towards the staircase. Just as I began to climb, he said, "Hiccup."

I froze and replied, "Dad! â€¦Uh, I need to talk to you, Dad." He turned to face me, rubbing his hands together. "I need to speak with

you too, son."

He took a deep breath and said, "I think it's time for you to learn to fight dragons." The only problem was, at the same time, I said, "I don't want to learn to fight dragons." We both looked at each other confusedly and said, "What?"

Stoick looked at me awkwardly. "You go first," he told me. "No, you go first," I responded, climbing back down the stairs.

He sighed. "You get your wish," he said. "Dragon training. You start in the morning."

I grew alarmed and babbled, "Oh man, I should have gone first. Because, you know, we have a surplus of dragon-fighting Vikings! But do we have enough" â€" I tried to think â€" "bread-making Vikings? Or perhaps small-home-repair Vikingsâ€|"

My father interrupted me by roughly placing an axe in my hand and telling me, "You'll need this." I stopped my rambling and said in a quavering voice, "I-I don't want to fight dragons."

Stoick laughed, clearly thinking that I was joking. "Oh, come on, yes you do!" he chuckled. "Rephrase," I sighed. "Dad, I can't kill dragons!" My dad crossed his arms, still laughing. "But you will kill dragons!" he encouraged.

"No, I'm pretty extra sure that I won't!" I protested desperately. The last thing that I wanted was another near-death experience.

"It's time, Hiccup," Stoick suddenly grew grim. "Can you not hear me?" I nearly screamed, my voice breaking with fear.

"This is serious, son!" he scolded me. "When you carry that axe, you carry all of us with you. That means you walk like us" â€" he adjusted my posture â€" "you talk like us, and you think like us." He pointed to his head in case I didn't get the point. If I was, say, Snotlout, who was considerably more well-built to be a dragon-slayer, maybe I wouldn't. But his point came through crystal-clear to me.

Stoick finished with a disdainful, "No more ofâ€| this." He indicated with his meaty hands as to what he meant, to which I rolled my eyes and said, "You just gestured to all of me."

My dad's expression didn't change. "Deal?" he asked. "This conversation is feeling very one-sided," I complained. "Deal?!" Stoick asked again, more harshly this time. I sighed resignedly and said, "Dealâ€|" I knew that I was going to regret this.

But Stoick, for once, was satisfied. "Good," he muttered, reaching for his helmet, which was hanging near the door. "Train hard," he said in an unusually encouraging tone. "I'll be backâ€| probably."

As he exited, I muttered back, "And I'll be hereâ€| maybe."

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****Arena****

Gobber pushed the iron gate upwards, allowing it to slide easily out of his way. "Welcome to dragon training!" he called in a jolly voice, allowing me and the other trainees to walk past him into the arena. "No turning back," I heard Astrid murmur as she led the way for the others.

Despite myself, I found myself gazing in wonder at the immense, chain-linked net that covered the arena, preventing the caged dragons that were used in training from flying away.

"I hope I get some serious burns!" said Tuffnut with his characteristic sadistic grin. "I'm hoping for some maulingâ€¦ like on my shoulders or lower back," his sister Ruffnut piled on. "Yeah, it's only fun if you get a scar or two out of it," agreed Astrid.

"No kidding, right?" I asked sarcastically, making everyone â€" Astrid, Snotlout, Ruffnut, Tuffnut, Fishlegs, and Snaketail â€" turn towards me. "Painâ€¦ love it!"

There were a few groans. "Who let him in?" asked Tuffnut exasperatedly.

"Let's get started!" shouted Gobber, pulling the gate back down, sealing us all in. "The recruit who does best," he continued, "will win the honor of killing his first dragon in front of the entire village."

Snotlout sneered, "Hiccup already killed a Night Fury, so does that disqualify him?" Everyone except Snaketail and I laughed. "He did, you know," she said helpfully. "I saw him." But the others ignored her. I gave her a smile to let her know that I appreciated her help.

We all lined up in front of the dragon cages that were built into the far wall. I ended up between Snaketail and Fishlegs, who wasn't so bad when compared to the others.

"Behind these doors," lectured Gobber, "are jus' a few of the many species yeh'll learn to fight! The Deadly Nadderâ€¦"

Fishlegs muttered, "Armor: 16." I rolled my eyes â€" his constant spewing of dragon statistics was annoying, if albeit impressive.

"The Hideous Zipplebackâ€¦" Gobber continued, and Fishlegs responded, "Plus 11 stealth, times 2."

Gobber went on, "The Monstrous Nightmareâ€¦" Again, Fishlegs; "Firepower: 15."

"The Grapple Grounderâ€¦" Fishlegs' eyes widened at the mention of the rare dragon's name and said excitedly, "Plus 14 Speed!"

"The Terrible Terrorâ€¦ WOULD YEH PLEASE STOP THAT?!" he suddenly shouted to Fishlegs, who had just said, "Attack: 8, Venom: 12!"

Gobber finished with a flourish, "Andâ€¦ the Gronckle." He rested his arm on the lever that opened and closed the cage. "Jaw strength: 8," muttered Fishlegs.

The atmosphere grew tense as everyone slowly realized what he was about to do.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Snotlout said. "Aren't you gonna teach us first?!" Gobber smirked and adjusted his grip on the lever. "I believe in learning on the job," he snickered, before pushing down on the lever.

A Gronckle burst from out of the cage, snarling and flying around at high speed. Everyone scattered as the dragon bumbled around clumsily.

"Today's lesson is about survival," Gobber shouted over the sudden din. "If yeh get blasted" â€" he paused as the Gronckle, unable to turn in time, slammed into a wall â€" "yeh're dead! Quick, what's the first thing you're going to need?"

I sarcastically shouted back, "A doctor?" Fishlegs worriedly guessed, "Plus 5 speed?" Astrid, naturally, got the correct answer. "A shield!" she shouted, to which Gobber directed us towards the rack bearing the various shields.

"Yer most important piece of equipment is yer shield," Gobber instructed. "If yeh have to make a choice between a sword and a shield, take the shield!"

As I struggled to pick mine up, he shoved it into my hands and pushed me back into action. I couldn't help noticing that it, along with my new axe, was lighter than it looked, enabling me to carry them easily with one hand each.

As could be expected, Ruffnut and Tuffnut began to fight over a shield that they both wanted. "Take that one," suggested Tuff. "It's got a flower on it. Girls like flowers." His sister suddenly tore the shield from his grasp and slammed it on top of his head. "Oops," she said with mock regret. "Now this one has blood on it."

They continued fighting, unaware that the Gronckle was zeroing in on them until it was too late. It shot a fireball that exploded against the shield, throwing them both to the ground. "Ruffnut! Tuffnut! You're out!" Gobber yelled as they got up dazedly.

"Those shields are good fer another thing," he continued. "Noise! Make lots of it to throw off a dragon's aim!" Everyone, me included, simultaneously began to bash their weapons against their shields, the sudden noise causing the Gronckle to shake its head confusedly.

"Now," Gobber kept up the talk while we avoided the Gronckle. "Every dragon has a limited number of shots. How many does a Gronckle have?"

Fishlegs instantly answered, "Six!" to which Gobber replied, "Correct, six! Or five right now, which is one for each o' yeh!"

The shout of Fishlegs caught the Gronckle's attention, and it aimed

for Fishlegs with another fireball. The projectile crashed into his shield and reflected off, hitting Snaketail's shield as well. She screamed and raced for cover. "Both of you, out!" Gobber called again as Fishlegs yelled in panic and rushed after Snaketail.

"Hiccup!" Gobber suddenly shouted to me. "Get in there!" I had previously ducked behind the shield rack. I was about to get out when another fireball from the Gronckle hit the wall inches from me. I dove back into my hiding spot without hesitation.

Making sure that the Gronckle's attention was focused elsewhere, I cautiously crawled out into the open. As I did so, the Gronckle fired another blast at a distracted Snotlout and blew his shield to bits. "Snotlout! Yeh're done!" called Gobber in a voice that suggested that he was having a good time watching.

Astrid, who had dodged out of the way of that last fireball, suddenly landed right beside me. "So I guess it's just you and me, huh?" I asked conversationally. Too late, I saw her eyes widen and heard her reply, "Nope. Just you!" She quickly ran away, and before I could do anything to stop it, the Gronckle blasted my shield, knocking it out of my hand.

"One shot left!" cried Gobber as I ran after my smoking shield. I could hear the Gronckle's thrumming wings as it closed in on me. Veering to the side, it blocked my way, separating me from the shield and chasing me towards a wall.

This is looking really familiarâ€| I thought in a panic as the Gronckle pinned me against the stone. Hovering on the spot, it opened its mouth to blast me with its last shot, and I braced myselfâ€|

â€|Only to hear the deafening boom of the fireball hitting the wall next to me. I opened my eyes and saw Gobber tugging on the side of the dragon's mouth with his hook. "And that's six," he grunted. "Go back to bed, yeh overgrown sausage!" he suddenly yelled at the struggling Gronckle, throwing it back into its cage.

Gobber locked the door and muttered, "Yeh'll get another chance, don't you worry." Then, turning to the rest of us, he wrapped up his lesson. "Remember, a dragon will alwaysâ€| _always_â€|"

He hoisted me up by my arm and finished in a deadly whisper, "â€|go for the kill."

As Gobber and the others walked out of the arena, I remembered something about the Night Fury I had freed in the woods. "So why didn't you?" I murmured under my breath.

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****Berk Woods****

Crouching over the remains of the ropes that had once trapped the Night Fury, I murmured again, "Why didn't you?" Getting up again, I squinted through the trees, recalling the sight of the Night Fury escaping in that very same direction.

I made my decision to see where it had gotten to. I walked deeper

into the forest, trying to figure out the path the dragon might have taken. Surprisingly, I noticed that it had left a clear path behind " when I looked closely, several trees looked like they had been damaged.

The pattern continued on in a mostly straight direction, so I followed it. Briefly, I wondered why a dragon would fly into so many trees when it could have avoided them.

The journey ended at what looked like a solid rock wall that was about ten feet high. Seeing a rather large crack in the side of it, I ducked through and traversed the short tunnel that the crack had formed.

The sight that met my eyes then was stunning. I was standing on a small cliff overlooking a huge crater-like structure at least twenty feet deep. On the other side was a gigantic tree whose roots dangled over the edge and right down to the ground. The peaceful scene was complete with singing birds and the presence of a clear lake dominating the bottom of the gorge.

The Night Fury was nowhere in sight. "This was stupid," I sighed to myself. That's when I saw something glinting in the sunlight. I looked down and saw several flat, black objects rather like river stones. I picked one up, feeling the smooth, shiny surface under my fingers.

Wait, these are scales, aren't they? I wondered. I peered harder at the object in my hand. I hadn't seen a dragon scale by itself up close before, so I wasn't entirely sure. But the more I thought, the more convinced I became. _That means that the Night Fury IS in this area!_ I thought excitedly.

All at once, there was a scream and a huge black shadow that came shooting up from the below. I instinctively fell back, watching as the shadow passed me by, heading for the rim of the crater. Looking straight up, I saw the Night Fury practically right next to me, scrabbling with its claws at the stone that made up the walls of the gorge.

Failing in its attempt to climb up, the Night Fury quickly glided away on silent wings, only to crash-land on the banks of the lake. Apparently frustrated, it tried again at a different location, only to get the same result " failure.

An inspiration struck me. I dug out my little notebook and my piece of charcoal and quickly sketched a drawing of the Night Fury, noting the position of its fins and its general body shape.

"Why don't you just" fly away?" I quietly asked it, as if it could hear. As it spat a blue bolt of flame at the ground in anger, I noticed that the tail was missing one of its fins. That, I guessed, was the source of the dragon's inability to fly properly. I unconsciously smudged out one of the tail fins I had drawn.

The Night Fury tried again, only to crash even harder. From my vantage point, I saw it go limp, as if it were giving up. Then I watched as it crept to the edge of the lake and thrust its head in. _Is it catching fish, maybe?_ I asked myself. If it was, that effort was fruitless as well.

I was totally fascinated by this mysterious creature, so fascinated that I let my grip on my charcoal loosen. Too late, I fumbled for it, only to see the stick fall with a clatter onto the rocks below.

Instinctively, I shot a nervous glance at the Night Fury, only to see its vivid green eyes staring right back at me. I paused. Was that a hint of recognition I saw deep in those orbs?

I cocked my head to the side, curious now. With a tiny jolt, I saw the dragon copy my movement, tilting its head ever so slightly. It seemed to share my curiosity. At that moment, a single thought crept through my mind.

Are dragons really just pests to be killed? Or are they something more?

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****And that's that! Reviews are always appreciated, and stay tuned for Chapter 4!****

4. Reading the Dragon Manual

****Oh, it would be worth being a Viking just to read the Dragon Manual. Think of the things you could learn! My imagination is running wild just thinking about it!****

****â€| Then again, that's probably just me. On with the show, thenâ€|****

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The rain was pouring down, and the occasional rumble of thunder pierced the gloom. The sun had already set, and the rain had doused all of the torches, adding up to form an almost impenetrable darkness.

I headed for the only source of light I could see â€" the Great Hall, whose overhang protected the torches burning at the entrance. By the time I walked up the last of the stairs leading up to it and opened the door, I was soaking and chilled to the bone.

"Where did Astrid go wrong in the ring today?" I heard Gobber ask, and I unconsciously thought, _Oh great. Like I need to spend more time with those jerks._ But I was tired and cold, and their stinging remarks never really bothered me anyway. I continued in, shutting the immense door behind me.

"I mistimed my somersault dive," Astrid complained bitterly. "It was too sloppy." Tuffnut sniffed and said, "Yeah, we noticed."

Snotlout, predictably, tried to cheer Astrid upâ€| in his own way, of course. "No, no, you were great! It was soâ€| soâ€| 'Astrid'." She simply rolled her eyes and returned to her chicken leg.

By this time, I had reached the table at which they sat and picked up the last plate, upon which lay a stone-cold leg. Snotlout instantly

noticed me and moved over " presumably so I wouldn't have a place to sit with them " but I was already heading for an empty table.

"Now, where did Hiccup go wrong today?" asked Gobber, and I winced inside. _Here it comes,_ I thought.

Snickering, Ruffnut suggested, "Uh, he showed up?" Her brother joined in with, "He didn't get eaten!" The laughs and guffaws were silenced by Astrid's cutting voice. "He's never where he should be," she said matter-of-factly.

I stayed silent, but in my mind, I laughed. _Blame my dad for that. If I had a choice, I'd have stayed as far away from the arena as possible, thank you very much._

Snaketail was the only one besides Gobber who wasn't making fun of me. She abandoned her meal and came to sit down next to me. "Don't mind them," she began, but I cut her off. "It's fine. They've never bothered me."

But I knew that it wasn't true. I was even more of an outcast than before, if that were possible, humiliating myself in Dragon Training as I was.

I pulled myself back into reality as Gobber spoke again. "Yeh have to live and breathe this stuff," he announced, holding up an old book in his hand. "The Dragon Manual " everything we know about every dragon we know of."

He let the book fall onto the table, and the thud it made was like an exclamation point that got my thoughts racing. _Everything we know about every dragon we know of,_ I repeated his words in my mind. Something like hope surged inside of me. _The Night Fury!_

A flash of lightning and a rumble of thunder dimly sounded outside. "No attacks tonight," muttered Gobber. "Study up."

It took a moment for his words to sink in to the others. "Wait," said Tuffnut in realization. "You mean _read?!_" Ruffnut piled on, "While we're still _alive?_"

Snotlout slammed his fist onto the table in frustration. "Why read words when you can kill the stuff words tell you stuff about?" For some reason, I grew really annoyed at his attitude, and opened my mouth.

"Let me put it this way," I said, allowing my voice to carry over to their table. "If you don't read the words, you won't know how to kill it. And if you don't know how, you'll end up getting killed instead " which would do Odin a great favor." My voice was dripping with so much sarcasm it scared me.

Everyone was looking at me with different kinds of expressions " Snaketail was startled, Ruff and Tuff were smirking, Fishlegs was appalled, Astrid was indifferent (but paying attention to me, at least), and Snotlout looked personally insulted.

Finally, he growled, "You guys read, I'll go kill stuff." He stood up and left the Great Hall.

Fishlegs followed, saying excitedly, "I've read it, like, seven times. There's this dragon that buries you for, like, a week!" His voice quieted as he left as well.

"There was a chance I was going to read it," grumbled Tuff, and Ruff finished, "But now!" They left as well.

Snaketail was next to leave, looking at me concernedly as she did so. That left me and Astrid. I made a move for the book lying next to her.

"So, I guess we'll share?" I said, somewhat hopefully. She looked at me weirdly and pushed it towards me. "Read it," she said in a monotone voice. I stopped, finding it odd that she was not only talking to me, but doing it without the usual disdain.

"Great, all mine then," I said sarcastically, and I was sure Astrid could hear me even as she walked out the door and into the rain. This sarcasm thing was becoming somewhat habitual, I noticed. I guess it was just my way of expressing my feelings. Maybe I also hoped that she'd find it funny, but who was I kidding?

It was quite dark by now in the Great Hall (the wind having blown the central fire out), so I lit a candle and opened the book.

"Dragon classifications," I read out loud. "Strike class, Fear class, Mystery class."

I began with the Tidal class. The first page depicted a detailed sketch of a Thunderdrum. "_This reclusive dragon inhabits sea caves and dark tide pools," said the book. "_When startled, the Thunderdrum releases a concussive sound that can kill a man at close range. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight._"

The next dragon was a Scauldron. I couldn't help smiling at the funny-looking beast, with its enormous belly and long, serpent-like neck. "_The Scauldron sprays boiling water at its victims. To acquire this firepower, it heats up seawater in its cauldron-like stomach. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight._"

I skipped a few pages, to the end of the Tidal class. To my surprise, there was a dragon that I had never seen before. It looked a lot like a Scauldron, except that it stood upright on all fours, causing its back to slope downwards. Its front paws were adorned with fearsome talons. It looked more like a land-dwelling dragon than a water-dwelling one.

"_The Gravekeeper is a cousin of the Scauldron. It buries its prey in a deep hole dug with its front claws, then covers it with dirt and water sprayed from its mouth. The resulting mud is an excellent preservative, keeping its victim fresh and tender for weeks. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight._"

I shuddered at the idea of ever meeting a Gravekeeper. I flipped to the next class – the Mystery class. The dragon that greeted me was a strange-looking fellow, with fin-like horns and wings. It was, according to the book, a Changewing.

"_Changewings are known for their chameleon ability, being able to

blend in with any environment. Each Changewing is different, as they acquire characteristics from their chosen environment. Some may have leaf-like scales sprouting from their legs, others may have pebble-like warts covering their bodies. They can spray a deadly acid, even when newly hatched. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight._"

It was beginning to bother me that each dragon was labeled, "Extremely dangerous, kill on sight." Of course they'd be dangerous, but was it really necessary to kill them? I shook myself and flipped to the next dragon, the mythical Boneknapper.

"_Boneknappers are said to be purely myth, although eyewitness accounts have been recorded every hundred years or so. They are poorly defended, so they cloak themselves with a coat of stolen bones. A Boneknapper with a full set of armor is said to be so terrifying in appearance that even an experienced Viking can go mad with fear upon seeing one. Its roar is so awesome, it can rip flesh from bones. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight._"

I gulped, imagining that horrid end â€" the piercing scream assaulting the ears, the agonizing pain of having the skin ripped away, and finally the merciful darkness at the end. Shuddering, I turned a couple of pages, and wished I hadn't.

Staring back at me with sightless eyes was a dragon even more horrifying. It was the Whispering Death. The book, unhelpfully, said, "_This dragon is so feared that even saying its name can provoke shudders of horror. Its weak vocal chords ensure that it cannot roar, only hiss softly. They prefer ambush attacks, burrowing up underneath prey by drilling through rock with their multiple sets of rotating teeth. Because of their habit of gently hissing in victims' ears before attacking, it is rumored that they prefer the taste of prey that has died in a state of fear. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight._"

Those blank, white eyes seemed to hold me prisoner for a few seconds, before I hastily turned the page. The Gronckle was next. I already knew a lot about Gronckles, so I turned the page again. Awaiting me in the Sharp class were two equally well-known dragons â€" the Deadly Nadder and Timberjack. Reflecting on how Timberjacks could fly through dense forests by simply slicing through the trees with their razor-sharp wings, I skipped several pages.

"_Grapple Grounders pummel their prey with strong kicks and tail lashes,_" said the book when I found a picture of the serpentine dragon. "_They are immensely fast â€" the only known dragon faster than it is the dreaded Night Fury._" My heart skipped a beat at the mention of that name.

"Kill on sight, kill on sight, kill on sightâ€|" I kept muttering as I continued to flip through the book, with each dragon passing me by. "Hideous Zippleback, Skrill, Devious Snaptrapper, Monstrous Nightmareâ€|" I murmured the names of the dragons as they passed. They looked so realistic that they appeared to move before my very eyes.

Then, a single picture caught my eye as I neared the end of the book. It was of a creature that looked more like a giant eel than a dragon. Beside it was a drawing of a young Viking, about my age from the look

of him, with wings sprouting from his back.

"_Sirens are incredibly rare dragons that are known from only a single surviving eyewitness account. It is unknown to which class they belong, sharing traits of the Tidal, Fear, and Mystery classes. They are responsible for the deaths of many Vikings, luring them close with its human-like appearance, then suddenly shape-shifting into its true form to finish them off. The Siren's most deadly weapon is its song, which can lull anything into a deep sleep._"

I drew a sharp intake of breath. I could feel my heart racing at the very idea of such a deadly creature. I flipped to the very last page of the Dragon Manual, trying to get the image of the Siren out of my mind.

The page was mostly blank, except for a little bit of writing at the top and bottom. "Night Fury," I breathed, reading out loud once more. "Size unknown, speed unknown. It is the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself. Never engage this dragon. Your only hope is to run and pray it does not find you."

Unconsciously, I took out my sketchbook and opened it to the page with my drawing of the Night Fury in the forest canyon. I held it out and placed it on the open manual, so that the page looked complete at last.

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****Hel's Gate (Stoick's POV)****

"I can almost smell them," I murmured, staring hard at the map I had with me. "They're close."

I and my small fleet of ships were heading for the foggy region north-west of Berk, where the dragon nest supposedly was. The dense fog never lifted, hiding the dragons' dark secrets. Ever since Vikings had arrived on Berk three hundred years ago, the hidden nest had remained elusive. In my heart, I knew that this trip was to be as futile as the uncountable others.

I steelled my courage and commanded to the pilot of my ship, "Take us in."

The pilot instantly shouted to the other ships, "Hard to port!" All three of the Viking ships sailed straight into the fog, seeming to be swallowed by the murk.

The ship that was last in line was lagging slightly. The pilot became nervous as he saw the sterns of his companion ships vanish. It was too quiet, and his warriors began to mutter to themselves, trying to encourage themselves or otherwise break the uncomfortable silence.

"Wait!" he shouted as a shower of pebbles showered down from the immense rock spire to his starboard side. "I heard something, everyone keep still and quiet!"

There was silence. The dozen-odd Vikings looked around nervously, reassuring themselves that if a dragon was pursuing them, the lack of noise would confuse it as to its prey's whereabouts.

The pilot was just congratulating himself on how cautious he was being when he heard something else â€" a soft, gentle hiss right next to his ear.

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****On the Second Ship****

Looking back, the pilot of the second ship in line fidgeted slightly as he saw the following ship disappear into the fog. Ten seconds later, there was a huge amount of screaming, as if the ship was being attacked. Then, only silence.

The ship bumped against something, causing the Vikings on board to exclaim and shift their balance. The pilot dismissed it as a rock and quickly forgot about it.

Then, there was another bump, from a different direction this time. Not a second later, there was another bump from yet another direction. Spooked, the pilot gestured for the Vikings to be quiet.

There was no sound except for the rippling and splashing of water around the boat. The pilot determinedly stared ahead, concentrating on the job at hand. Then he saw one of his comrades gasp and point to something behind him. Reluctantly, he turned.

The last thing he saw was a green, pelican-like maw, agape as it squirted a blast of scalding water right at his face.

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****On Stoick's Ship****

I tensed as I heard another round of screaming, this time closer to my ears. I knew that the third ship was already no more, and it seemed that a similar fate had befallen the second one. I was determined that nothing would get this ship.

But doubt crept into my heart once more as I remembered how badly the other searches had gone in the past. _Who am I kidding?_ I asked myself. _It's hopeless. We'll be lucky to escape with our lives._

So preoccupied was he that he almost didn't hear one of his men's cry of "Stoick!" The Viking pointed up toward a rock spire that was looming ahead.

At first, I thought he was warning me so that we didn't crash into it. Then I saw what he truly wanted me to see â€" a dark shape perched near the top of the spire, flexing its wings ominously. Its eyes glowed through the fog, and it seemed that they were staring straight at me.

I saw a mouth open on the creature, revealing deadly fangs. With a thrill of terror, I heard it begin to sing, the sweet, mystical sound wrapping me in its soft, soothing coils. I instantly began to fall into slumber. I hit the deck and began to snore peacefully, despite the fact that I knew I may not wake up again.

-.-.-.-.-

****Quite a different end than what you were expecting, huh? I decided to take some of Hiccups' fears about the Dragon Manual and make them a reality for Stoick and his men.****

****I also decided to incorporate a few more of my fictional dragon ideas here, taking the forms of the Gravekeeper and the Siren.****

****Speaking of Sirens, you recognized the one at the end, did you? That particular dragon becomes very important to the story later onâ€|****

****Anyway, the next chapter will be coming soonâ€| if a dragon doesn't get me nextâ€|****

5. Meeting a Dragon

****Sure, Hiccup and Toothless have already met, but this is the first time they really get to interact with one another.****

****No twists this timeâ€| just stuff from the movie.****

-.-.-.-.-

"So I just happened to notice that the book had nothing on Night Furies," I called sheepishly. "Is there another book? Or a sequel? Maybe a little Night Fury pamphlet?"

My inattentiveness was rewarded (and I mean that in the most sarcastic sense of the word) a second later, as a plume of blinding flame burnt right through the blade of my axe.

"Focus, Hiccup!" called Gobber from his vantage point beyond the cage covering the top of the arena. My eyes bugged in horror as I saw the Deadly Nadder climb down from its perch and run at me with a squawk. Frantically, I tried to outspeed it, twisting and turning randomly through the maze that Gobber had set up.

"Today is all about attack!" called Gobber, letting his voice carry to reach everyone's ears. "Nadders are quick, and light on their feet. Yer job is to be quicker and lighter!"

I had to admit that the maze had a certain logic to it. While the Nadder was busy hopping around on top of the maze walls, looking down each corridor, we could sneak around and hopefully escape before it saw us. We could see it, but it, for a few moments at least, couldn't see us.

Fishlegs and Snaketail made an unlucky turn down one path, only to find that the Nadder was already observing that corridor. With a shriek, it extended its tail spines and whipped them ferociously at Fishlegs. He only just managed to bring his shield up in time to block the incoming missiles.

"I'm really starting to question your teaching methods!" he screamed

at Gobber, as Snaketail abandoned him to run down a separate path.

In response, Gobber idly called out a bit of advice, sounding as if he didn't have a care in the world. *"Must be nice,"* I thought with the usual snide edge as I just avoided the Nadder's eyes.

"Look for its blind spot," he suggested. "Every dragon has one. Find it, hide in it, and strike!"

Ruff and Tuff both turned a corner to come face-to-maw with the advancing dragon. The Nadder blinked confusedly as it turned out, directly in front of it was its blind spot. The twins moved as the dragon's head did, trying to stay in that spot.

Ruff gagged as she caught a whiff of Tuff's body odor. "Don't you ever bathe?" she grumbled under her breath, hoping the Nadder wouldn't overhear. "If you don't like it, then get your own blind spot," Tuff snapped, his voice worriedly loud.

"How 'bout I give you one!" yelled Ruff, butting heads with her brother. Unfortunately, she forgot to be quiet, and the Nadder spat a stream of blindingly bright fire at the sound of her voice.

"Blind spot, yes," said Gobber. "Deaf spot? Not so much." He chuckled as if that was the funniest thing in the world.

Finding myself beneath Gobber again, I tried asking another question, but the only response I got was "Get in there!" I protested, but was interrupted by a forceful whisper of "Hiccup!"

I turned to see Astrid and Snotlout crouching behind a wall, trying not to attract the attention of the Nadder. It was now quietly stalking down the corridor next to them, trying to listen for its prey. "Get down!" Astrid told me in that same whisper. Without argument, I slipped in next to Snotlout.

As soon as the Nadder had its back turned, Astrid rolled across the path to the next wall. Seeing her success, Snotlout followed, also making it across safely.

"Here goes nothing," I thought, bracing myself. I threw myself forward in a similar somersault, and for a fraction of a second, I thought that I had actually made it. But I didn't have enough momentum to make it to the other side, and fell to the ground awkwardly.

The Nadder's head snapped towards me and it instantly pounced. I scrambled to my feet and ran like Hel, past Astrid and Snotlout who were bravely confronting the enraged dragon.

I hid behind them, trying to catch my breath. I saw Astrid start to throw her axe, and I privately said goodbye to the Nadder. But Snotlout stupidly intervened on one of his tangents again, fruitlessly hoping to impress Astrid. "Watch out, babe. I'll take care of this," he said confidently.

Chuckling his weapon at the Nadder, which was staring at him in confusion, I saw the weapon twirl through the air and miss by a mile, thumping against a wall as it did so. The Nadder tore its eyes off of

the moving object and warbled.

It comically sounded like the dragon was laughing at Snotlout. I almost laughed too " when Astrid struck it with her axe, causing it to fly into an even bigger rage. The laugh turning into a yell, I booked it down a corridor as the Nadder screeched and ran full force at Astrid, clumsily knocking down walls and making a mess of the maze as it did so.

I stopped to catch my breath. But now the walls in front of me were tumbling down, and Astrid was desperately climbing it, the Nadder snapping at her heels. There was no time to react as she shrieked, "Hiccuuuuuuuup!" on her way down.

Next thing I knew, the dust was clearing and Astrid was struggling to disentangle herself from me. I pulled my legs away, only making things worse. She growled frustratedly, the expression making me think, _Wow, she's even prettier up close_

I stopped thinking about that and tried twice as hard to get her off of me. Tuffnut's sneering voice could be heard in the distance " "Ooooh, love on the battlefield!" Then Ruffnut joined in " "She could do better."

Oh, gods! I thought as I realized how this situation must have looked from their perspective. Astrid finally managed to untangle herself and stand up. I sat up, only to see the Nadder free itself from under a pile of downed walls.

I prepared to run, only to feel Astrid's boot in my face as she pulled on her axe, which was stuck in my shield. She pried the shield off, and as the Nadder charged at her, she whacked it right in the snout, shattering the wood of the shield. The Nadder dazedly stumbled off, before slumping to the ground in an unconscious heap on the ground a few meters away.

I caught sight of Astrid's glare and braced myself again. It didn't take long for the tempest to hit.

"Is this some kind of a joke to you?!" she screeched almost as loud as the Nadder. Holding her axe to my throat to stop me from moving, she continued, "Our parent's war is about to be come our own. Figure out which side you're on."

She pulled the axe away and stalked off. Oddly, she didn't frighten me. She was making my temper rise to a boil. Remembering the word format of the Dragon Manual, I began to mutter under my breath. "Astrid. Stoker-class dragon with an unpredictable temper. Extremely dangerous, kill on sight."

My eye twitched a little bit as Astrid slowly turned to me in response to my sarcasm. At first, she looked as if she were about to laugh, when she scoffed and walked out of the arena, axe held over her shoulder.

-.--.-.-.

****Gorge (Night Fury's POV)****

There I was, minding my own business. I had just failed another try

at flying out of my prison, not to mention another fishing attempt, and was feeling the hunger gnaw incessantly at my stomach. Moaning softly, I tried my best to get comfortable on a large, sloping rock that was set perfectly in the sunlight.

I don't know when I heard the soft splat off to my right, but I do know that it was after I had closed my eyes for a while. I curiously looked over and saw a lone fish sitting there. It hadn't been there before. My eyes narrowed in suspicion and I shuffled closer to the rock, trying to make myself hidden.

A few moments passed, and then the human boy, the same one that claimed to have trapped me in those infernal ropes and injured my tail, stepped out from within a crack in the fissure wall. Certainly too small for a dragon of my size. I found myself almost envying the human for being able to slip through such small places.

I shuffled even closer as the human boy abandoned the shield that he had been carrying and picked up the fish, looking around. I knew that he was looking for me. Why wouldn't he be? I had already given him enough reason not to be frightened of me " sparing his life for one. _As he did mine,_ I unconsciously thought, but brushed the thought away.

Finally, the smell of the fish grew so tempting that, against my better judgement, I crawled back down from my rock. The noise caused the human to rapidly turn around, startled. I jumped down in front of him, growling suspiciously. I had never trusted humans, and I wasn't about to start.

But this humanâ€¦ I began to think. _It seems that this one is different from most. He isn't asâ€¦ largeâ€¦ as the others, and certainly less intimidating. He cut me loose from the ropes that he himself captured me in, and now is walking boldly up to me with a fish in his hands._ I forced such thoughts from my mind once more and growled louder.

The human boy brushed his hand against his coat, pushing it back and allowing me to see the dagger held in his belt. He reached for it, and I snarled, "Drop it." I knew he wouldn't understand me, but I didn't want to even begin to trust this boy until he was fully unarmed.

Incredibly, he somehow understood, pulling the dagger out and dropping it on the ground next to him. Deciding that it wasn't enough, I jerked my head to the side, indicating that I wanted him to throw it in the lake. I knew that this human might, just might, be worth trusting if he interpreted my gesture correctly and if he actually obliged.

I was just beginning to tell myself that he wouldn't do such a thing, that humans are usually far too stupid to understand, when my eyes widened in surprise at the sight that greeted me.

The human picked up the fallen dagger with his foot and kicked it into the water. I heard the soft *plop*, and I knew that it was gone for good.

I was so shocked that I forgot to maintain my threatening posture. I dropped my wings to my sides and sat upright, widening my pupils. I

once again eyed the fish hungrily, and the boy held it out again.

Cautiously, narrowing my eyes again, I shuffled forward, a little awkwardly due to my missing fin. He held the fish out farther, and I opened my mouth, revealing the inside. I sniffed the fish, making sure it wasn't tainted.

"Huh," the human muttered. "Toothless. I could have sworn you had" â€" I decided to take the fish. I unsheathed my teeth and lunged for the fish, snapping it up eagerly and swallowing it whole.

"Teethâ€" the human breathed, checking his hand for any missing claws â€" or whatever humans called those fleshy digits.

Still hungry, I moved closer to the boy, nostrils widening and dilating as I probed the boy for the possible scent of more fish. "Uh, no, no," he stuttered, falling onto his rear and frantically backing up against a rock. I moved ever closer, nose almost touching him. Then he fearfully whispered, "I don't have any more!"

For some reason, this statement stopped me. I knew instinctively that this time of day was when humans usually ate, and since he had given up his only fish for me â€" which was really generous of him, I had to admit â€" I decided to give him something in return.

Hang on, I thought in protest. _Why should I care about whether he eats or not?_ But thought was deed, and I half-closed my eyes, working my throat as I fought to eject some of my recent snack. After a moment, I spat out the head of the fish onto the boy's lap.

I retreated, sitting on my hind legs, waiting to see if the boy would eat it. He looked at me quizzically. A few moments passed. I grew a little impatient and gestured to the fish, hoping he'd take the hint. _Go onâ€" I thought. _Eat it._ Then for some reason, _You deserve a share._

I blinked. How had that thought entered my mind? I pushed it away and turned my attention the human once more. He screwed his face up and hesitantly took a bite out of the raw fish. "Mmmm," he mumbled contentedly. Oddly, I was pleased to see him enjoy it.

But why wasn't he swallowing it? He seemed to like the fish, so why wouldn't he swallow. I fought the urge to roll my eyes. _Humans are so weird,_ I told myself. "Come on, swallow," I said impatiently, swallowing myself as if to show him how it was done.

"Mmf!" he exclaimed with his mouth full, giving me a sour look. Only then did he swallow his morsel â€" only to puff out his cheeks again, as if it wouldn't go down. He held a fist to his mouth and swallowed again, shivering slightly.

"There you go!" I said almost proudly, as if he were a chick successfully eating his first whole fish. In response, he pulled his lips back and showed his teeth in a smile. I knew that this was what humans did when they were happy or amused.

Once again, I had no idea what came over me at this moment. Struggling, I attempted to smile back, to show the boy that I was happy too. I finally got it after a moment, remembering to retract my

teeth so as not to intimidate him.

The boy looked surprised "no, astounded" at my show of happiness. Obviously, he realized that dragon's often didn't smile. But now he looked almost hypnotized, and at this my smile faltered. _What's wrong with him?_ I wondered. _It's like he's seeing me for the first time._

Then I saw his hand reach out, almost close enough to touch my snout. Finally, I regained some of my common sense and growled, "Not so fast." He pulled his hand back at my growl, appearing frightened now. _He should be,_ I thought irritably, before I flew over to the other side of the lake, crash-landing slightly.

I just wanted to get away from that| fascinating human before I was forced to think any more treasonous thoughts.

-.--.-.-.

(Hiccup's POV)

When the Night Fury vomited up the fish head for me, my first thought was, _Urgh, that's gross._ But when the realization sank in "that it was providing me with an offering of food" I was stunned. Disgusted for sure, but stunned as well.

The same beast that my tribe was at war at had given me a morsel of food as thanks for what I had done. It was feeding me as if I was its own child. The dragon had even encouraged "OK, more like forced" me to eat it.

I didn't particularly enjoy the raw, Night Fury-saliva-coated fish, but I grinned all the same, trying to show the dragon that I appreciated its kindness. It had given me a kind of curious look, and before I knew it, its reptilian lips had parted in an unmistakable, toothless smile.

If I had been stunned before, I was now completely flabbergasted. I never knew dragons were capable of showing their emotions in such a way "even if the Night Fury was only mimicking me. Hel, I never even knew that they _had _emotions! But now it seemed I knew better; dragons could feel happy, and sad, and frightened, just like us|

Before I knew it, I was reaching out with my hand to touch the Night Fury, to show him that I could be trusted, and didn't want to harm him. But, apparently, I was moving too fast, and the Night Fury snarled and flew to the opposite bank of the lake.

I decided to follow, despite my better judgment. But I had a good feeling about this dragon. I didn't know why, but I felt that, possibly, the two of us could become _friends_.

I reached the Night Fury just as he was torching the ground with fire, making a comfortably warm spot for him to sleep on. As he settled down, he noticed me, normally slitted pupils wide again. I took this as a sign that he was docile. But he simply turned the other way and covered his head with his tail "the tail that I had maimed. He would never fly again because of me. I felt guilty, and

this time, I didn't push the feeling away.

"OK, he just wants to be alone for a while," I told myself. "I understand. I'm just gonna go over here for a while, give him some space" I kept muttering to myself as I settled myself on a relatively flat rock some distance away.

Apparently, the Night Fury wasn't comfortable sleeping on the ground, at least for now, because when I looked back again he was hanging upside down from a tree branch like a giant bat. I turned away and found a long stick sitting next to me. With nothing better to do, I began to draw in the dirt.

Drawing is one of my favorite hobbies. Working in the smithy would usually count, but I consider that to be more of a job than a hobby. So I relaxed completely as I drew, forgetting where I was and concentrating entirely on the shape my lines and scratches in the dirt were forming.

Unconsciously, I was drawing the Night Fury. It was the first time I had attempted such a thing " having seen him for the first time only a few days ago " but I have to admit, it looked pretty good.

As I sketched in the eyes, I saw a shadow fall over me. Instinctively, I knew it was the Night Fury itself, but I nervously pretended that I hadn't noticed. The noises the dragon was making as it stood over me sounded friendly, curious, and somewhat comical. _He's interested in what I'm doing,_ I realized.

Then he was gone, and a huge snapping sound occurred, followed by rustling noises. I finally looked upwards to see what the commotion was, and what I saw astounded me yet again.

The dragon had a huge tree almost as long as he was in his mouth, and was proceeding to drag it along in the dirt. I didn't know what he was doing, but it certainly looked like he was having fun. He was making all these twists and turns with the tree in the dirt, hitting me in the head with the leafy end a couple of times.

He glanced at me once, an eager look in his eyes. "What do you think?" he seemed to ask me. I stood up on my rock to get a better look, and the truth hit me like Thor's lightning: the Night Fury was imitating me yet again, but this time, he was imitating me with my drawing stick! He was honest-to-gods _drawing_ in the dirt, just like I had been!

Finally, the dragon stopped, seemingly satisfied with his work. I could only stand there, gawking in wonder at the strange, squiggly line he had drawn in the dirt all around me. Was there anything that I could discover about this dragon that wouldn't shock me to my core?

I got up, planning to walk back to the village and dwell on this. But suddenly, I heard a harsh growl from the Night Fury. I automatically looked down where he was glaring, and I saw that I had stepped on one of the lines in his "drawing". I lifted my foot, and the growl changed to a low warble.

A few more times, I intentionally stepped on the drawing, just to

make sure that this wasn't a coincidence. When I was sure, I stepped over the line this time, and he didn't growl. Instead, the dragon seemed pleased that I was catching on.

The sun was setting, so I knew that I had been here for several hours already. I needed to get back to the village for my nightly sleep, so I started moving around the tangled lines, taking extra care as to not step on anything.

I kind of lost track of what I was doing, because I was justâ€¦ lost in the little dance I was doing. Twisting and turning with each step, avoiding the lines, I found surprisingly fun. I smiled to myself as I continued to step around the drawing, wishing that this rare moment of fun wouldn't end.

Suddenly, I stopped. I felt a presence behind me, and a soft snort came from above me, ruffling my hair. I turned and found myself face-to-face with the Night Fury. I looked into his eyes, and they seemedâ€¦ peaceful. As if he no longer considered me a threat. As if he trusted me.

I reached out with my hand again, more cautiously this time. Narrowing his eyes, the dragon growled softly at me, warning me not to go any closer. But something told me to go on. I knew that we could trust each other now.

So I only drew my hand back a little bit, looking at my feet. I reached out again, stopping when I had stretched my arm out as far as it would go.

I waited. I could feel the warm breath of the Night Fury as he remained stationary. I could only imagine what he must be thinking.

Then, ever so slowly, I felt him press his head against my hand. I let out a soft sob, ducking my head even more. The dragon's head felt warm, dry, and smooth. The scales felt almost leathery, and nothing what I had expected them to feel like.

It was too wonderful for words to describe.

-.--.-.-.

****Aww, finally they've come to trust each other! Things can only go up from here, right?****

****Review please, because I need some feedback, and wait for Chapter 6!****

6. How to Train a Dragon

****Chapter 6 is up now. These chapters are short, definitely, but I have over twenty of them planned. And possibly more on the way. Yep, you readers have a lot to look forward to, it seems!****

****This chapter isn't particularly long, but hey. There's only so much I can cover in one chapter.****

****Anhedral: Thanks for the suggestion, but I've decided it would be**

easier for me to follow the movie's plot for now. Don't worry, I've got several amazing twists planned later on for you to look forward to!**

-.--.-.-.

It was nighttime again. I had quickly returned to the village practically the moment the sun had set, and had run into Gobber at the forge. He told me that the Dragon Training gang was going to be camping with him at the top of one of the abandoned catapults, so I had no choice but to go along with them.

It wasn't like I even noticed the jeers and teasing remarks from the other trainees. All I could think about was the Night Fury and how we had finally come to trust each other, albeit not entirely. Luckily, no one seemed to notice my withdrawn silence, or at least become suspicious of it.

"And with one twist, the Blundertail bit off my hand, and swallowed it whole!" Gobber said dramatically, in the middle of telling one of his war stories. "I saw the look on 'is face" I was delicious! He musta passed the word, 'cause it wasn't a month before another one of 'em took my leg!"

He held up his peg leg for all the teenagers to see. Of them, only Fishlegs and Snaketail looked partially impressed.

"Wasn't it weird to think of your hand as inside a dragon?" inquired Fishlegs curiously. "Like, if your mind was still in control of it, you could have killed the dragon from the inside by crushing its heart or something." All he got were a mix of blank and exasperated stares.

"I swear, I'm so angry right now!" growled Snotlout, glaring at his burnt chicken as if he hated it. Clearly, he was still fuming over his embarrassing failures in the arena earlier today. "I'll avenge your beautiful hand, and your beautiful foot! I'll chop up the legs of every dragon I fight" with my face."

Predictably, he shot a glance toward Astrid, probably hoping to see if she'd caught his boast. She didn't even look up from her chicken.

"It's the wings and the tails you really want," corrected Snaketail. "If it can't fly, it can't get away." Gobber twisted a leg off of his own chicken and waved it around for emphasis. "She's right. A downed dragon" is a dead dragon."

There was silence after that. The statement echoed in my mind, and the image that instantly appeared in my mind was that of the Night Fury, unable to fly and doomed to remain trapped in the gorge. I definitely wouldn't be able to keep him a secret forever, and anyway, we trusted each other now. That meant that we could help each other" didn't it?

"Alright, I'm off to bed," yawned Gobber. "You should be too! Tomorrow we get to the big boys" slowly but surely making our way up to the Monstrous Nightmare."

I made up my mind to help the Night Fury learn to fly again. And I

thought I knew just how to do it.

Putting down my half-eaten fish, I quietly snuck away from the fire pit and toward the stairs leading down to the bottom of the catapult. The second I could no longer see the others, I bolted.

"I'm gonna kill that dragon," I could hear Tuffnut bragging as I rapidly made my way down. "It's my destiny, see?" That was all I could make out before the catapult was behind me, and I was racing for the forge.

However, I hadn't noticed Astrid looking down curiously at my retreating figureâ€|

-.--.-.-.

****Gorge****

During the half-hour walk from the village to the gorge, I allowed myself time to reflect on the events of last night.

After leaving the makeshift campsite Gobber had set up, I had ran straight to the forge. Opening up my sketch of the Night Fury, I had studied it, trying to recall the shape of his remaining fin â€" the way it swept back behind the tail, the number of webs it had between each joint, every little detail.

As I did so, I had begun drawing designs. This was nothing new to me, since I had done countless other designs for dragon-killing weapons (ones which never worked, or at least the way I wanted them to). But this design was different. I wasn't using it to kill a dragon, I was using it to help one.

It was what I planned to be a prosthetic tail fin, as similar to the remaining one as possible. The dragon would wear it on his tail, and if I could get it to work properly, maybe he'd be able to fly again. _After all, _I reasoned, thinking of Gobber and all of the other Vikings on Berk with missing limbs, _if it works for people, why can't it work for dragons?_

I remembered the entire process that my newest invention had taken shape through. I now carried the finished product with me now. It wasn't perfect, I noticed as I looked down at the bundle I carried under my arm, but it would have to do.

That reminded me of what had happened this morning. After grabbing an hour or two's sleep, I had grabbed the tail fin from under my bed and immediately headed for the forest.

Unfortunately, I had run into Gobber on the way there. I had no clue as to why he was up so early, but that wasn't important. What was important was the fact that he had spotted me.

"Mornin', Hiccup!" he had said cheerily. "Well, yer up unexpectedly early, now aren't ya?" I had laughed nervously and tried to hide the fin behind my back. "Uh, the early bird catches the worm, as they, um, say!" I had replied, trying to sound equally cheery.

Gobber seemed to have bought it, although he did spare a curious glance at the bundle that poked out from behind me. "I'm gonna need

ya in the forge today, Hiccup," he had said. "We're gonna need some replacement weapons fer when yer father comes back."

My laugh at that had been genuine â€" even Gobber knew that Stoick would come back empty-handed. "Well, later," I said casually over my shoulder. "Just off to the woods for anâ€¦ erâ€¦ early morning walk."

Now Gobber looked bewildered. I assured him, "Just something I like to do to, uh, clear my mind andâ€¦ relax. The forest air helps withâ€¦ that."

He raised an eyebrow, but didn't question me. "Jus' promise me one thing, Hiccup," he had said surprisingly seriously. "Fer Odin's sake, be careful out there! The day before yer father left, I'd heard rumors about a rogue dragon in the woods."

I had tried not to gasp, but a small one escaped anyway. Was the Night Fury in danger of being discovered already? Did someone, perhaps, hear the deafening roar that he hit me with when I had set him free?

"Yah, I know," chuckled Gobber, misinterpreting my gasp. "Yak dung, that bit o' information is. Probably just a big wolf that's killed Hoark an' Bjorn." He had walked off then, whistling under his breath.

All of this had run through my mind very quickly. Now I thought as I neared the gorge, _Hoark and Bjorn informed the village that they went off yesterday to investigate something. They haven't returned yet? Did they maybe encounter the Night Fury, and heâ€¦_ I gulped, cutting off these increasingly worrisome thoughts. If only I knew where exactly they had perishedâ€¦

But now, I was nearing the gorge. I checked behind my shoulder instinctively (although I had highly doubted anyone would be bothering to follow "Hiccup the Useless" at this un-Thor-ly hour), then ducked behind a small boulder.

Hidden under the boulder was a basket of fish. I had kept it here for weeks, stocking up on fish and grabbing one to eat whenever I went for a walk in the forest. Thankfully, thanks to the tightly woven threads that made up the basket, the fish wouldn't go bad for months. I had taken the last fish yesterday for the Night Fury, and had restocked last night. Now, I planned to use these fish to help me with the dragon's new prosthetic.

Entering and climbing down into the gorge, I instantly caught sight of the Night Fury lounging in the sun like an oversized lizard. With a deep breath, I walked around the lake's edge towards him.

As I did so, I looked around nervously, keeping an eye out for the skeletons of Bjorn and Hoark. Of course, I didn't find them. That reassured me that the Night Fury hadn't been the killer. _But what other dragon could have done it? There isn't any other dragon here besides the Night Furyâ€¦ that I'm aware of. Gobber was probably right â€" it was just a big wolf._

"Morning, Toothless!" I called, and the nickname surprised me somewhat. It had just slipped out, butâ€¦ it fit the dragon.

As the newly christened "Toothless" raised his head sleepily in response to my voice, I held up the basket of fish I was carrying. "I brought breakfast," I invited. "I hopeâ€| urghâ€| I hope you're hungry!"

With supreme effort, I threw the basket down and let the twenty or so fish pile up on the ground with a series of wet splats. "OK, that's disgusting," I murmured to myself. "So we've got some salmonâ€| some nice Icelandic codâ€| and a whole smoked eel!"

I was pretty impressed with the variety of fish that I had caught â€" fishing being one of the only things that I was ever good at â€" when I saw Toothless draw back from the fish, which he had been inspecting, with a suspicious growl. I dug into the pile of fish and drew out the yellow-and-black eel, holding it up before me. _Is this what he's growling at?_ I wondered.

Apparently so. Toothless reared up onto his hind legs at the sight of the eel and roared in disgust and terror. Somewhat shocked that such a mighty beast would be scared of something as small as an eel, I exclaimed, "No, no, no! It's okay!" Throwing the eel into the lake, I wiped my hands on my jacket and assured him, "I don't really like eels much either."

Now convinced that he was safe, Toothless once again began nosing the pile of fish. "That's itâ€|" I murmured under my breath, sneaking around to his tail. "Just stick with the good stuffâ€| and don't mind meâ€| I'll just be back here, minding my own businessâ€|"

I set the tail fin down on the ground beside me and went to grab his tail. However, it moved out of my way suddenly. Nervously, I glanced back up at Toothless â€" he was still eating, already half-done the pile of fish, totally oblivious as to what I was doing.

But when I went back to his tail, it kept moving every time I tried to grab it. Once, it suddenly flicked up from the ground, startling me and causing me to become frustrated. I climbed over the tail and sat on it, futilely trying to keep it still. Toothless suddenly lunged forward, dragging me backwards a couple of inches.

Grumbling under my breath, I started the work of attaching the fake fin to Toothless' tail. Thankfully, the dragon stayed relatively still as I worked. I heard a growl emerge from his throat, so I knew that he had definitely noticed me by now. But for reasons of his own, reasons that I probably wouldn't be able to comprehend, he let me proceed.

After about a minute's worth of work, I had securely tied the tail fin to his tail. I sat back up to admire my work. "There we go," I muttered. "It's not too bad, it worksâ€|" I didn't hear the sound of unfolding wings until it was too late.

With Toothless' tail properly weighted again, I guess he felt fit enough to fly again. With a mighty pounce, he leapt into the air with strong beats of his wings. Needless to say, I was taken completely by surprise by this maneuver.

"Oh gosh! Oh, gods!" I cried again and again. The tail bobbed up and down violently â€" whether or not it was because of my added weight,

I couldn't tell " but nevertheless, it was getting really hard to hold onto my breakfast after three seconds of it.

Judging from the height we had risen, I'd say that we were almost to the lip of the gorge. But right then, Toothless began to fall with a strangled roar, flailing his claws and flapping his wings frantically. I quickly turned my attention to the tail, and saw with a jolt that it was closed.

I reached for it, and pulled it completely open.

Toothless suddenly swerved straight upwards, and I felt dizzy from the sudden change in direction. Also, I was now completely upside down.

At the speed Toothless was going, we had risen out of the gorge and high into the sky in only a few moments. As I gained an impressive bird's eye view of the woods, I exclaimed in jubilation, "Oh my " it's working!" I pulled hard on the tail fin once more, causing Toothless to make a hard right turn and down, back into the gorge.

As we skimmed the surface of the pool, I didn't know how to describe the feeling that I was getting. It was like a mix of joy and pure terror, but it felt great, indescribably great! "Yes! Yes! I did it!" I cried, unable to contain my newfound emotion.

It was at that moment that Toothless swiveled his head to look at me hanging for dear life onto his tail. Our eyes met, and I gave him a grin. But he suddenly carved a violent turn in the air and flung me off.

The water rushed to greet me. I hit the surface with an enormous splash, grabbing a quick breath before I became completely submerged. Managing to regain control of my plunge, I swam for the surface, inhaling deeply through my mouth when I reached it.

I was just in time to see Toothless' new fin return to its folded-up position, and Toothless himself involuntarily dive sharply for the water. I saw the annoyed and confused look he gave his tail, wondering why it was suddenly defective again.

I ducked my head under the water to avoid the rainstorm that occurred as Toothless' splash flung what seemed like half the lake into the air.

We were wet, sore, and tired (after all, it was still early in the morning). But I, for one, was feeling great! One of my inventions had finally worked, I was friends with a dragon, and to top it off, I had just experienced my first flight!

"Yeah!" I cheered, hopping up above the surface with my hands in the air. But then, I saw that my plunge had caused something to float to the top of the water " it was the eel that I had gotten rid of for Toothless.

Dragons are scared of eels " who knew? I thought with wonder.
But say" that gives me an idea"|

-.--.-.-.

(Toothless' POV)

I knew that the boy was up to something the moment he entered my sanctuary. He had come with a suspicious-looking basket and an even more suspicious-looking bundle under his arm. I kept my distance from him, warily growling under my breath. "What's that you have there?" I murmured.

He had opened the basket and spilled its contents onto the ground â€" a huge pile of delicious fish! My own fishing attempts had been futile again, so I was grateful to see the human willingly bringing me enough fish for a good meal.

I was certainly startled to see the eel hidden amongst the morsels, but I could tell from the boy's reaction that he hadn't expected me to be afraid of it. Cautiously at first, I then gave into my hunger and ate to my stomach's content.

That was when I felt the boy doing something with my tail. I didn't pay much attention at first, but thenâ€¦ it was as if I was complete again. I felt him strap something to my tail, over the scar that existed where my left fin once did. Then, it was as if the urge to fly again swelled up from my heart and overtook me.

Taking a huge leap, I flew for the edge of the gorge. The boy was hanging on tightly, but he didn't matter for now. All I could concentrate on was getting out of this prison.

But my efforts seemed to be for naught â€" at least, until I suddenly rose into the air as swiftly as I used to be able to. "Yes! It's working!" I exclaimed joyfully, at the same time the human said almost the same thing.

I could feel the boy tug on the thing that he had attached to my tail, and suddenly, I was banking right, down into the gorge again. I looked back and saw the contraption for the first time. I was surprised to see a wooden object, one that greatly resembled my old fin, strapped to my tail with leather.

As much as I appreciated the boy's favor â€" indeed, I instinctively knew that he was trying to help get me airborne again â€" I knew that he had to get off. He was interfering with my ability to steer. Turning sharply, I flung him off and immediately relaxed once I knew that he was gone.

But something was wrong. I could no longer steer properly. I glared at my once-again-defective tail as I went into an uncontrolled crash. _Why?_ I asked myself angrily. _Why doesn't this thing work anymore?_

I braced for impact a moment before I hit the water. A dawning realization hit me at the exact same time, but with twice the force. _I need the boy. I need the human to help me fly. Otherwise, I will remain grounded._

Bursting out of the water and gasping for air, I turned to the boy, who looked exhilarated. "I want to fly again," I muttered to myself, "and that human â€" MY human â€" might just be able to help."

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****Arena (Hiccup's POV)****

I stood with the pail of water in my hands beside Fishlegs and Snaketail. Gobber had separated us into groups of two and three for our next Dragon Training lesson. We all carried the same pails full of water. However, I was the only one struggling to maintain my grip on it. _It feels like my arms are about to fall off,_ I complained inwardly. _Why can't water just be a little lighter?_

"Today is about teamwork!" Gobber called, unlocking the cage door. "A wet dragon head can't light its fire, so that's why yeh've got those buckets with ya."

I could see wisps of green gas drifting out from under the still-closed door. A sparking sound occurred from behind, and before I could brace myself, a cataclysmic explosion blew the doors open and filled the arena with ever-advancing smoke.

"The Hideous Zippleback," continued Gobber, "is extra tricky! One head breathes gas, and the other head lights it. Yer job is to know which is which!"

Fishlegs, Snaketail, and I were surrounded on all sides by the obscuring cloud. We could all hear the hisses and warbles of the hidden Zippleback, but we couldn't see it at all. I knew that the smoke would dissipate given time, but by then it could be too late.

"Razor-sharp serrated teeth that inject venom for pre-digestion," Fishlegs recited under his breath. "Prefers ambush attacks, crushing its victimsâ€¦" I gritted my teeth, thinking, _This really isn't helping my nerves._ I furiously whispered as loud as I dared, "Would you please stop that?!"

Snaketail held her bucket in one hand while she held her free arm up as if to protect me. "If you're scared, Hiccup, you can hold my hand if you want," she suggested, giving me â€" could it be? â€" a slightly flirtatious smile. "Uh, no thanks, I'm good," I said sheepishly with a shrug.

Even through the smoke, I could hear Snotlout boasting to his partner, Tuffnut, "If that dragon shows either of its faces, I'm gonna" â€" but then, he must have seen the Zippleback preparing to strike, as he suddenly shouted, "There!"

I heard two separate splashes of water, followed by a couple of screams. "Hey!" I could hear Ruffnut exclaim indignantly. "It's us, you idiots!"

I have to admit, this comic relief is helping, I thought with a silent chuckle. Soon I forgot all about the lurking dragon as I heard Tuffnut sneer, "Your butts are getting bigger. We thought you were the dragon!"

Snotlout tried to make things up with a casual, "Not that there's anything wrong with a dragon-esque figureâ€¦" Judging from the muffled thuds and grunts of pain that followed that comment, it

didn't work.

But just then, a furious hiss broke through the arguing voices. I could hear Tuffnut yelp in pain, and as the smoke finally began to clear, I saw him stumble over his sister. "Ow, I'm hurt! I am _very_ much hurt!" he screamed, throwing himself behind Gobber.

Fishlegs, unhelpfully, muttered to us, "Our chances of survival are dwindling to single digits now!" Heavy footsteps cut off his muttering, and we all raised our buckets, tense with anticipation.

One of the Zippleback's heads broke through the still-prominent screen of smoke right in front of us, twisting and turning as it focused its attention on Fishlegs. It drew worryingly close to his own head, causing him to panic and toss his bucketful of water on it.

I was just about to sigh in relief, when I saw its eyes narrow and gas gurgle out from its maw. "Uh, whoops," Fishlegs chuckled nervously. "Wrong head."

With a terrifying shriek, the Zippleback shot a stream of gas right in his face. Fishlegs screamed and ran in the opposite direction, tripping over Snaketail's feet on the way and causing her to drop her bucket.

It was now up to me. The smoke vanished completely, and I now had a clear view of the entire dragon. Both heads stared down at me, with the left head emitting several sparks threateningly.

"Now, Hiccup!" Gobber called, and I threw my water at the sparking head with all my might. Just my luck, the water fell just short of my target. "Oh come on," I said exasperatedly.

The Zippleback advanced on me, no longer holding back. Both heads glowered down upon me, one head with wisps of gas still trailing from it, and the other shooting sparks at me, leaving little doubt what it was about to do to me.

But I wasn't afraid. I had a backup plan.

I raised my hands as if to push the Zippleback away. And here's the crazy part — its heads retreated. They shrieked in fear, exchanging terrified glances as I got back up onto my feet.

"Back! back! back!" I commanded again and again. With each order, the dragon retreated, taking hasty steps backwards, away from me. "Don't make me tell you again!" I told it boldly, growing more confident as I saw that my plan was working.

As it hurriedly ran and hid in the shadows that occupied its cage, I said triumphantly, "Yes, back — back into your cage! Now — think about what you've done."

I pulled my jacket back to reveal — none other than the eel that I had accidentally scared Toothless with this morning. I threw the dead serpent into the Zippleback's cage, and I witnessed with satisfaction the dragon draw back even further, back legs going up the wall as it tried to avoid its slimy adversary.

Casually, I pushed the cage doors closed and locked them. Turning around, I saw the other trainees' faces. Each and every one had the same dumbfounded expression on it. Even Gobber looked completely bewildered.

"So, are we done?" I asked as if we had just finished a pleasant discussion. "'Cause I've got some things I need toâ€¦ Gobber needs me in the forge, soâ€¦ see you, see you all tomorrow!"

I walked off through the exit and across the bridge leading to the arena, full of newfound confidence. However, I turned away from my comrades too soon, completely missing the look on Astrid's face turn from shock to suspicionâ€¦

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****And there we are! Things can only go uphill from here.****

****But as you all know, the higher you go â€" the farther you have to fall.****

****As far as new twists are concerned â€" Gobber's hand and leg were bitten off by a Blundertail, Snaketail may be developing a crush on Hiccup, and there's another dragon in the woods besides Toothlessâ€¦****

****Reviews are deeply appreciated, and Chapter 7 will be coming soon.****

7. Unforseen Success

****This chapter was probably one of my favorites to write, mostly because it alternates from scene to scene, perspective to perspective.****

****Also, we get the addition of a new dragon appearance â€" the Grapple Grounder! One of my favorite dragons in the franchise, I think.****

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It was morning again. I had worked in the forge all night again, grabbing a few hours' worth of sleep before heading off to see Toothless again. This time, alongside another basket of fish, I carried a saddle under my arm. I knew that I had to help Toothless master that new tail fin of his, or else he'd eventually be discovered and killed.

Alongside me, most likely.

I arrived at the gorge and hid the saddle behind a boulder, instead presenting Toothless with his breakfast first. When he had finished with it, giving me a happy lick across the cheek to show me that he appreciated the meal, I headed for the aforementioned boulder, saying, "You're going to love this, Toothless."

I revealed the saddle with a flourish, holding it before me. "Let's get flying, buddy!" I invited him. However, he didn't look all that

impressed with the saddle. I guess he knew that I was going to be riding on his back if this partnership was to work, and he didn't like the idea one bit.

I spent an entire hour trying to chase him down and get the saddle on his back. It was only then that we could practice flying. "Honestly, if I didn't know any better, I would have thought that you made me do that just for the heck of it," I gasped, still trying to catch my breath. The only response I got from Toothless was a teasing grin.

My original idea was that I would sit on the saddle, which rested in turn on Toothless' back, and I would hold a length of rope in my hand. To change direction, I would simply tug on the rope, and the tail fin, which the rope was firmly tied to, would open or close.

It turned out not to be the best idea in the world. When we were airborne, I tried to get Toothless to go left. I tugged on the rope as hard as I could, and Toothless went the wrong way. I plunged into the water of the lake for the second time in as many days.

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****Arena****

The Grapple Grounder was released from its cage. It roared, tipping its head back and trying to frighten us. I don't know about the rest of the trainees, but it was working very well.

The Grounder's speed was like nothing we've ever faced in Dragon Training. In just a second, it had lashed out with its tail and disarmed Astrid of her shield, then kicked out with its back leg and sending her to the ground. She didn't even have time to raise her axe against it.

Luckily for Astrid, Snaketail caught the dragon's attention, and it rapidly scuttled after her. She, too, was unused to such speed, and ended up with its tail coiled around her. But if Grounders had a weakness, it was that they were easily distracted. Tuff ran by, catching its eye and causing it to drop Snaketail, heading for the new target.

The dragon was moving so fast, I knew that it was only a matter of time before it came after me. I must have been smaller and less noticeable than I thought, because it was a full minute and a half before it finally sighted me.

I ran for it, tipping over the rack of shields as I did so. My plan worked, somewhat â€" the Grapple Grounder stumbled momentarily over the mess of shields, then caught up to me almost immediately after that.

There was a whistling sound as its whip-like tail came at me, too fast for the eye to see. But the impossible happened â€" I acted by reflex, diving out of the way of the speeding tail. There was a loud *crack* as the tail snapped just above the ground, missing me by inches. I had dodged the lightning-fast attack.

The Grapple Grounder looked just as shocked as anyone else. As Gobber

and the others turned away, muttering to themselves over my near-impossible achievement, I took the opportunity to slip the Gronker a fish I had hidden in my jacket.

The dragon squealed with delight as it snapped the treat up. It nuzzled me with its head as if thanking me. "Not now," I muttered to it, nervous eyes on my classmates. "They might see us like this and get suspicious, and who knows how much trouble I'll be in when they find out I'm on good terms with a dragon!" I kept up the babble as I led the Gronker to its cage and locked it.

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, I bid a silent thanks to Toothless, whose flights I had shared seemed to have improved my reflexes. Then, I headed for the forest, looking forward to more flying.

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****Gorge (Toothless' POV)****

It was a nice afternoon – a rarity, I knew, on Berk. The boy (whose name I now knew was "Hiccup") and I were attempting once more to complete a successful flight.

After a few crashlands, Hiccup had tied the rope he used to control my fake fin to his foot, leaving his hands to grip the saddle for extra stability. _Smart,_ I admitted to myself. _This human is so unlike the others._ I wondered how many times Hiccup would surprise me.

This time, we managed to make it out of the gorge. "An improvement," I muttered. We were now flying over the forest, with Hiccup murmuring to himself up on my back. I had to admit, I was getting used to the extra weight now.

Suddenly, a tree loomed in our path. I could feel Hiccup tugging on the fin with his foot, but it wasn't enough. "Good Thor, LOOK OUT!" I screeched, knowing full well that Hiccup wouldn't understand me.

Predictably, we crashed pretty hard. As it turned out, we had crash-landed at the edge of the forest, and we both fell lightly into a field full of tall grass. I didn't recognize the grass until we were completely covered in it.

The sweet, succulent smell of the plants caused my pupils to shrink, as they always did whenever instinct took over. It was dragon nip! _What luck!_ I thought happily in the back of my mind. I couldn't help myself – I began rolling and playing in the field, not even aware that I was doing it. It felt so good!

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****(Hiccup's POV)****

The crash was surprisingly soft when I hit the ground. The grass was long and smelled very good. I couldn't ever recall seeing this grass anywhere else on Berk.

That was when I could see and hear the grass rustling in the near

distance. I pushed my way through the field and saw none other than Toothless, still in his riding gear, rolling around and around endlessly in the grass. He was purring contentedly, as if he didn't have a care in the world just at that moment.

Either that crash knocked all the sanity out of him, I mused, _or the grass is irresistible to him._ I plucked a blade and sniffed it. The sweet stench was almost overpowering up close.

If it's overpowering to humans, imagine how strong it must be to Toothless. I looked at him, still playing and oblivious to the world around him. Were all dragons like this " at least, when they encountered this plant?

"I think," I decided, looking at the blade I had picked, "I'm going to find out."

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****Arena****

Today, we were training against the Gronckle again. Gobber had given us another go with it to see how much we had improved since our first lesson. I wasn't feeling too confident, despite the blade of dragon nip I had clutched in my fist.

Tuff and Ruff were doing something completely crazy " as Ruff lured the Gronckle in toward the ground, Tuff jumped on its tail and tried wrestle it to the ground. With an annoyed grunt, the Gronckle careened into the wall, the impact throwing Tuff off of it. He groaned on the sidelines as the dragon went after Fishlegs.

Fishlegs couldn't run in time, but he held his shield up before him, prepared to defend. Thankfully, the dragon's tackle hit the shield and not him, but the force of the blow caused him to fly across the arena and hit the wall. He slid down next to Tuffnut, completely unconscious.

Spotting me from the corner of its eye, the Gronckle bumbled my way, prepared to give me the same treatment. I held my dragon nip out like a talisman to ward off evil, directly in front of me.

The smell of it made the Gronckle hit the ground, skidding in right next to me. I could see its huge nostrils working as it vigorously inhaled the scent of the blade. I took a chance and began to rub the dragon nip roughly across its snout. My plan worked and my theory was confirmed " the Gronckle flopped onto its side, tongue lolling from its mouth and wagging its club-like tail like an overgrown dog.

When Gobber had put the Gronckle back in its cage and congratulated me for another job well done, the other trainees clustered around me excitedly as I made my way out the door. Everyone was chatting at once " Snotlout looked very impressed, not jealous in the least, Tuffnut was grinning, Snaketail's eyes were sparkling, and Fishlegs was talking so fast I could barely understand him.

"I've never seen a Gronckle do that!" said Snotlout. "And how did you dodge the Grapple Grounder yesterday?" asked Fishlegs, finally talking slowly enough for me to understand. "It's like your speed went up by plus six or something!"

And those questions certainly weren't the only ones I didn't want to answer. "Could you tell me how you managed to drive off the Zippleback a few days ago â€" later tonight?" asked Ruffnut flirtatiously, giving me a not-so-subtle wink and earning a vicious scowl from Snaketail.

My mind gave me an excuse to leave, and you had better believe I used it. "Oh, I left my axe back in the ring!" I said with mock exasperation. "Let me go get itâ€" I'll, uh, catch up to you later."

I turned to leave, and almost ran into Astrid, who was lagging behind. "Ah!" we both exclaimed, and stumbled backwards. For an instant, our eyes met â€" but for some reason, I didn't blush or grow flustered like I normally did.

Still, I didn't want to linger in her presence for any longer than I had to. I turned and ran back to the arena, hoping to hide out there until the others had gone. I didn't have time for this â€" Toothless needed me.

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****Gorge****

Toothless and I had just returned from another unsuccessful attempt at flying. I was getting better at working the tail fin, but as we continued to crash, I started to think that using my foot to control the fin wasn't a good idea.

In the meantime, we had ended up in the lake, as usual. I had brought an extra set of clothes just in case this very thing happened, so at least I had been prepared. As I set my soaking wet clothes on a sunny rock to dry, I looked for a way to pass the time with Toothless.

I had been drying him off with a towel that I had brought (another wise foresight), when I had rubbed a little harder than I had meant to. Instead of reacting violently like I imagined him to, he simply purred and nudged me as if asking for more.

That was when my work of drying Toothless' scales had transformed into endlessly scratching his scales all over. The more I did it, the more he seemed to want. I had to admit, I was having fun with the whole thing.

Then, I ended up scratching him under the chin unintentionally, and Toothless just flopped to the ground. I was unnecessarily worried for a moment or two, but then he simply rolled over and gurgled in contentment.

I didn't know what about chin-scratching had caused him to drop like that. _This,_ I decided, this time almost instantly, _I should test in Dragon Training class tomorrow._

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****Arena****

I dodged the Nadder's fire blast in the nick of time. It charged at

me immediately afterwards, and once again, I managed to avoid it. The dragon hit the wall instead, stunning itself into near unconsciousness.

Unexpectedly, Astrid ran right by me and tossed her axe at the dazed Nadder. The weapon glanced off of its head spikes, driving it into a sudden rage. Astrid flawlessly rolled out of its way, leaving me completely exposed to it. The Nadder seemed not to care about the sudden change in available targets.

Quickly, I dropped my own axe and folded my hands in a non-threatening manner in front of me. Thankfully, the Nadder's curiosity was greater than its drive to do me harm, and it stopped inches away from me, regarding me quizzically.

I glanced over to where Astrid had ran off to and saw that she had retrieved her axe and was now running at the distracted Nadder with the weapon held over her head. I got behind the dragon, and before it could turn to see where I was going, I started scratching it behind the ears.

A contented warble escaped its throat as I continued. From underneath the Nadder, I could see Astrid's feet rapidly approaching, and I knew that she was seconds away from doing serious harm to the dragon. I seamlessly moved my hand underneath its chin and gave it a single scratch.

Instantly, the Nadder crumpled to the floor with a squawk, driven into complete submission. It rolled onto its back and waved its talons in the air playfully.

I looked up and met Astrid's eyes again. They were wide, shocked, and almost frightened. I gave her a shy smile before walking out of the arena, leaving Gobber to drag the Nadder back into its cage.

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****Great Hall (Astrid's POV)****

Dinnertime in the Great Hall was a mostly quiet affair â€" for me, at least. Everyone else was busy chatting enthusiastically about Hiccup the Useless' recent achievements. I snorted under my breath as I stared into my mug of yak milk. No matter how many dragons he conquered in the arena, he'd always be the same scrawny embarrassment he always had been.

Speak of the devil, I seethed, glancing up from my meal to glare at the boy who had just entered. The second he sat down at another table everyone â€" Snotlout, Tuff and Ruff, Fishlegs, and Snaketail â€" all went to join him.

Hiccupâ€| just what was happening with him? The useless wimp had gone from being just that to being a miraculously expert dragon fighter practically overnight.

It wasn't jealousy that was eating me from the inside. That was what I would say to anyone who accused me of such a thing. But deep down, I admitted that yes, I was jealous of Hiccup, of all people. He had stolen my status as most promising Viking trainee from right under my

nose, he kept up his newfound reputation day after day, and the worst part was that he didn't brag _at all_, instead being annoyingly modest about it and shrugging off any praise he received.

My anger intensified as I glanced over at the other table and saw Ruffnut flirting with him again. Even _she_ was buying this! this act! I slammed my cup down on the table and stalked out.

Hiccup was hiding something, and I was going to find out what it was.

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****Arena****

"Meet the Terrible Terror!" declared Gobber, and the cage unlocked. But instead of the doors opening, a tiny flap swung open near the base, and out crawled a small, lizard-like dragon. It innocently looked up at us and licked one of its eyes with its little tongue.

"Ha!" laughed Tuffnut, obviously not taking the little creature seriously. "It's like the size of my" - suddenly, the Terror pounced on him, knocking him to the ground with a kind of squeaky screech.

"Ow! Get it off!" howled Tuff, as the Terror started chewing on his nose with its gums. And I couldn't believe my eyes at what happened next - before I could even make a move toward the tiny dragon, Hiccup approached it instead.

Oh no he doesn't! I fumed inside, but when I lifted my axe, the Terror seemed to catch sight of Hiccup and suddenly scamper off Tuff and onto the ground. Then, as Hiccup slowly advanced upon it with his shield held in front of him, the Terror actually _ran_ from him, crawling back into its cage!

"Wow," commented Tuff, apparently back to normal all of a sudden. "He's better than you ever were." My response to that was a savage punch to the stomach that left him (hopefully) in just as much pain as when the Terror attacked him.

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****Berk Woods****

Thunk! There was the satisfying sound of my axe hitting the tree dead centre. I tore it free and instantly hurled it at another tree. Again, my accuracy was perfect.

I was practicing harder than ever, stretching myself to the limit. There was no way that Hiccup could beat me. I was determined, more so than I ever was, to win the honor of killing the Monstrous Nightmare, which was the dragon that Gobber traditionally set up against the best Viking trainee during their final exam.

I'm going to kill that dragon, I thought, anger and determination bubbling within me like water in a Scauldron's stomach. _I won't let Hiccup show me up, not when this is my time to shine._

I worked myself relentlessly. In my imagination, each tree was a dragon coming at me mercilessly, claws extended, teeth flashing in the sunlight, gas forming in their mouths as they prepared to breathe their fire.

I hit my targets perfectly time after time, never messing up or pausing to rest even once. I began to feel the old confidence come back. The confidence I had felt at the start of Dragon Training, when Hiccup was just that "Hiccup."

With a battle cry, I tugged my axe free from the last tree and prepared to hurl it at a new target, a tree I imagined to be a Deadly Nadder. I threw my arm back, when in my mind, a Whispering Death flew between me and the Nadder, mouth open and savage rows of teeth rotating terrifyingly.

The sudden appearance of the fictional dragon was enough to make me pause and surface from my daydream. Instead of a Whispering Death standing in front of my target, it was Hiccup, eyes bugging in shock. From the look on his face, it was clear that he had been minding his own business when I suddenly jumped out from the foliage and tried to throw my axe at his head. And nearly did, too.

He grimaced and slowly turned back toward the path he was following, muttering something that sounded like "Yeesh!" He then walked off, deeper into the forest and momentarily out of my eyesight.

This was my chance to see what Hiccup was up to. I climbed to the top of a large moss-covered boulder and scanned my surroundings. Impossibly, the boy was gone. I saw the leaves shaking where he had dove into the foliage only a second before.

Knowing that attempting to follow him would only result in getting lost, I swore and pounded my fist against the rock. "You've escaped me this time, but you won't get away the next."

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****Cliffs (Hiccup's POV)****

Finally, after hours of planning and even more hours of working tirelessly in the forge, I felt that I had perfected Toothless' fin. I had created a mechanism that took the form of a stirrup attached to Toothless' left side, which would adjust the position of the fin depending on the position my foot was in.

I had a feeling Toothless approved of the idea when I told him about it, and now it was a reality. I had tied the dragon to a strong length of rope, which was tied in turn to a boulder. We practiced using all of the different positions of the prosthetic fin, using the strong headwind to help lift Toothless into the air.

To aid in my ability to stay atop his back when flying, I had crafted a little riding vest that I now wore in place of my usual jacket, which was attached to the saddle by a strong, firm cord. As I noted each of the different positions the fake fin took and how it was used in combination with Toothless' real fin, I wrote each position down on a little slip of paper I had with me.

We landed for a small break. Toothless looked up at me with real

friendliness in his eyes " we had grown very close in the few days we had spent together. If someone had told me a week ago that I'd have a dragon as a best friend, I'd have advised them to get their head examined.

Scribbling down a few directions, Toothless and I took off once again, ready to keep practicing. As we lifted about a meter off the ground, the headwind picked up ferociously, until the rope snapped and we were sent flying headlong into a tree.

Painfully, Toothless got up " leaving me to dangle from his side. The cord which attached me to the saddle was stuck, and would need some work to remove.

I'll have to go to the forge again this evening for the proper tools, I told myself, making a mental note. _In the meantime" I'm literally stuck with Toothless for the rest of the day._

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****Berk Village****

"Hiccup," greeted one of the Vikings in the village. I leaned against a nearby house and waved casually. As soon as he was out of sight, I pulled on the cord, and Toothless began to follow me closely as I stalked under the cover of night through the village.

It had been nerve-racking, incredibly risky, and maybe just plain stupid to bring the Night Fury into the village. Maybe I should have just cut the cord with a sharp stone in the forest, then run back to the forge, grab the proper tools, and work on Toothless' saddle there. But sadly, that idea had only crossed my mind" well, now.

No one was around. As quickly as I could, I led Toothless into the forge. I instantly found the tool I needed and began to loosen the hook upon which the cord was stuck. As I did, Toothless looked around curiously. Without me noticing, he picked up a bucket and, seeing that it held no tasty snacks, threw it across the room. It landed with a loud clatter.

I froze, then got back to work. I had just put down the tool when something else caused me to freeze. "Hiccup, are you in there?" the voice called, and my mind started racing. That was Astrid's voice! _How the Hel did I not see her before?_ I asked myself, close to panicking.

The door to the forge was open a crack, and I could see her approaching. What happened next happened in less than a second " I opened the door, ran out, and slammed it shut again. She didn't seem to have noticed Toothless.

"Oh, uh, hi, Astrid," I said nervously. "Um, lovely night for a stroll, isn't it?" I don't think she would have bought it even if my voice had actually sounded convincing.

She got up in my face and said in an accusatory tone, "I normally don't care what other people think, but you're acting weird." Then she added as a sudden tug on the cord that still held me close to

Toothless made me stumble, "Well, weirder."

I gave her a dose of my best sarcasm. Before I did, though, I took a moment to reflect on the fact that my feelings for her, strangely, had pretty much evaporated. It was as if the more time I spent with Toothless, the less time I had to think about these feelings.

"So, why do you suddenly care about _me_?" I asked rhetorically. "Why don't you go back to not caring about myâ€| weirdness?"

Astrid seemed not to have an answer. In that instant, I felt Toothless tug more urgently on the cord. I was literally lifted into the air for a few brief seconds, and then I was pulled through the door and back into the forge.

It took me two seconds to climb back onto Toothless' back and ride him swiftly out of the village, leaving Astrid to stare in bewilderment through the doors, wondering just what had happened.

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I think we should stop there â€" Hiccup and Toothless' first flight will have to wait.

Reviews are good as always. I'll post the next chapter as soon as I can!

8. Chased Above the Clouds

Wow, this chapter is short.

I've been listening to "Test Drive", a soundtrack from the movie, while I was writing this. Oh, that music is so awesome.

Just before I finished this chapter, I was inspired to add a new twist to it. Hope you all like it!

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Docks (Stoick's POV)

Finally the island of Berk came into view, and I allowed my exhaustion to show. My boat was the only one of the three to have gotten out of Hel's Gate. The others had vanished shortly after we had first entered. And for a week after that, we had sailed through the mist, lost and confused, fending off dragon attacks at every turn.

Only three of us had gotten back alive â€" myself, Spitelout, and Sven. I was actually looking forward to a good, long rest when I got home.

We pulled into the harbor and climbed out of the boat. It was severely damaged â€" the sails had gaping holes in them, and the hull had been scorched by countless fire blasts. There would be so much work to do in order to replace and repair the boats, not to mention the weapons we had lostâ€| in a very un-Chief-like way, I held my head in my hands and moaned.

Gobber helped me up onto the dock. "I trust ya found the nest, at least," he said conversationally. "Not even close," I muttered, rubbing my eyes tiredly. The Siren's song was indeed powerful â€" I had been groggy ever since I had woken up from it, only to find almost my entire crew missing. "I hope you've had more success than me."

Gobber snorted. "Well, if by success you mean that yer parenting troubles are overâ€" then, yes." I stopped. _What? Parenting troubles?_ I wondered, then the full impact of what he had said hit. _Didâ€" did something happen to Hiccup?_

Then suddenly, there was an uproar of voices. "Congratulations, Stoick!" called a Viking. "Everyone is so relieved!"

Another man called, "No one'll miss that ol' nuisance! The village is throwin' a party ta celebrate!"

A sinking feeling took hold of me. "He's gone?" I asked Gobber cautiously, hoping that it wasn't true. I knew that as a Chieftain, I should be feeling relieved, but as a fatherâ€" well, I didn't know what to feel.

"Wellâ€" Gobber seemed reluctant to answer. "Well, yeah, most afternoons. But who can blame 'im, I mean the life of a celebrity is very rough. He can barely walk through the village without bein' swarmed by his new fans!"

I couldn't help it. My jaw dropped. "Hiccup?" I asked, hardly daring to believe it. At the same time, I was still a little confused as to what Gobber had said. He _was_ talking about Hiccup, right?

Miraculously, Gobber confirmed what he had just said. "Who woulda thought it, eh? Yer boy has thisâ€" _way_ with the beasts."

I closed my mouth again, the corners tweaking upwards with the hint of a smile.

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****Above Berk (Hiccup's POV)****

I had decided last night that Toothless and I were ready.

We had practiced for hours yesterday, getting the positions right and memorizing the patterns in which we had to turn, or brake, or slow down and speed up. It had gone on until the point when I had to go to the forge to fix my cord, and when I had left Toothless in the gorge for the night, I ended up thinking, _Tomorrow's the day we'll do it for sure._

So here we were. We were high in the sky above Berk, going on our first real flight together. It would be the test that would determine if Toothless was really ready to fly again.

It would also be the test that would determine how well-made our riding gear really was. I really didn't want the prosthetic, the cord, or the stirrup breaking while we were hundreds of feet above

the ground.

"Okay there, Toothless," I called out over the wind. "We're gonna take this nice and slow!" Then I checked my slip of paper or "cheat sheet", as I called it, for the correct tail fin position. I muttered to myself, "Position threeâ€| no, fourâ€|"

Checking the paper one more time, I clicked the stirrup into position, and the prosthetic fin opened wide. Toothless looked back at it and grunted in a satisfied way. He was ready to go.

"Alright, it's go time," I muttered, somewhat nervously. Just in case, I looked back at the fin to make sure that it was indeed in the correct position, then gripped the saddle and urged Toothless downward. We went into a steep dive, pulling out of it just as we reached the ocean's surface. We skimmed the water, and Toothless let one of his wings trail through the water and sent up a spray.

Passing underneath an arch, I observed with alarm that Toothless seemed to become distracted by the sight of a flock of seabirds flying overhead. But my worry was for naught, as Toothless simply averted his gaze and increased his speed, passing out from under the arch very quickly.

"Yes, that worked!" I exclaimed in relief, but sadly, I became distracted myself and steered Toothless toward a rocky spire that rose up out of the sea. I frantically pulled to the side, but we crashed anyway.

"Sorry!" I quickly apologized, only to steer Toothless into yet another rock spire. "My fault!" I exclaimed exasperatedly. Unforgivingly, Toothless forcefully slapped me with one of the flaps on his head.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm on it!" I replied rudely. "Position fourâ€| no, three."

The tail fin moved to a different position, and Toothless and I went sailing upwards alongside a particularly large rocky spire. Excited now, Toothless sped up, flapping his wings in short bursts as we ascended ever higher.

"This is amazing!" I called with exhilaration. "Oh, the wind in my face!" Feeling daring, I steered Toothless down into a near vertical dive. He roared happily, clearly enjoying the experience of flight as much as I was.

As we dove, I began to feel dizzy as the blood rushed to my head all of a sudden. But it didn't matter. I wanted to just stay up here in the sky forever, to experience everything there was to experience, to become a creature of the air.

We pulled out of our dive just over the forest, barely scraping the tops of the numerous trees. We flew fast over the immense forest, passing our gorge and a few other landmarks along the way.

But soon after we flashed past a remote clearing, located on one of the hardest places on the island to access, I heard a screech sound from just behind us. I looked back and gasped in fear â€" a huge,

serpent-like dragon was flying after us at an impossible speed!

"Oh, gods, Gobber was right! Gobber was right," I kept repeating to myself. When Toothless caught a glimpse of our pursuer, he let out a roar of terror and subsequently increased his speed. Indeed, the serpent looked a lot like a giant eel. Almost immediately upon noticing this, I remembered seeing a beast just like this in the Dragon Manual. It was a Siren.

"Come on, Toothless! We have to lose it!" I shouted, clicking the tail fin into a new position to allow for more speed. But then, I realized that we had to work completely in tandem with the other â€" with Toothless supplying the speed, and myself supplying the direction. I clicked the fin again, sending us into a sharp turn that took us back out over the ocean.

I looked back again, only to see the Siren coil itself up, focus its attention on us, and shoot forward as if hurled from a slingshot. The dragon spun like a torpedo, just missing us as it barreled straight toward us. Undeterred, it turned back toward us in one sinuous movement, then resumed its pursuit.

This time, I was unable to reposition Toothless' fin in time to avoid the dragon, and it caught up to us, easily keeping pace alongside Toothless. Then it struck, transforming into a half-human, half-dragon hybrid and latching on to the saddle with its talons.

Up close, I was able to get a good look at the beast. It was definitely male, with shoulder-length, sandy hair and pale skin. Strangely, he already wore clothes â€" a long-sleeved shirt and knee-length shorts made from what looked like leather. Immense wings extended from his back, and they flapped strongly as he fought to keep his balance.

I took a risky course of action â€" I took one hand off of the saddle and steered Toothless with the other, taking a dagger from my belt and brandishing it at the Siren. His response was to snarl and bare his teeth, revealing long, snake-like fangs in place of canines. Shuddering involuntarily, I slashed out at him clumsily with the dagger, managing to gouge a deep cut in his arm.

The Siren unlatched his talons with a pained shriek â€" certainly a strange noise to hear from a human mouth â€" and flew off a fair distance. But he didn't leave entirely, instead morphing back into his eel form and eyeing Toothless and I with undisguised hatred.

I shuddered again and turned back to face the front. We were now approaching the village, and I could already see a fair few Vikings out and about, minding their own business. Looking to the right, I could see a maze of rock spires and arches sticking up out of the ocean.

That was when the Siren struck again out of nowhere, coming up right behind us and snapping his terrible jaws at Toothless' tail. My eyes widened in fear â€" if the Siren bit down on the prosthetic fin, we'd be sure goners.

The rogue dragon was coming closer. I nervously looked ahead once more â€" should I go for the village, which was closer, or the rock maze, which I could lose the Siren within?

I glanced back at the dragon, then made my decision. _The village, _I thought determinedly, then prepared myself and clicked the stirrup once.

The tail folded up, instantly prompting Toothless to turn left and down. We rocketed toward the village with an awesome screech, and even at such a high speed I could see the shock of the villagers as they saw the Night Fury come out from the blue out of nowhere.

Just as we neared the ground, I clicked the fin back into its original position, causing Toothless to level out and skim the ground at a ridiculous speed. Vikings screamed and dove out of the way as we flashed around houses and other buildings, trying to get back up into the sky.

The Siren was close behind, but not for long â€" as he chased us through the village at high speed, he made a wrong turn and crashed into a house in a huge tangle of wood and wings. Seeing my chance, I steered Toothless up and back into the sky, back toward the ocean.

Luckily, I didn't think anyone had seen me riding atop Toothless (I didn't even think anyone had gotten a good enough look at us to tell, anyway). But I couldn't say the same for the Siren â€" looking back one last time at the village, I saw his head explode out of the pile of wood to screech at us in fury.

"Well, he's as good as dead," I said with good authority. Toothless agreed with me, clearly relieved to be rid of our pursuer. But when I faced the front again, I gasped in shock.

We were fast approaching the maze of rock spires we had seen while being chased. I glanced down to check my "cheat sheet" by reflex, only to see with a sinking feeling that it had gone. Whether or not the wind had ripped it off during the Siren's pursuit, I didn't know or care. All I knew was that any chance I had of navigating the rock maze was pretty much gone.

But then, I realized that wasn't true. _I've been using the fin without even looking at the cheat sheet this entire time,_ I thought, and a surge of confidence went through me.

I can do this! We can do this together! I realized, and clicked the fin again, sending Toothless and I flying straight for the entrance into the maze.

My foot worked like never before, adjusting and readjusting Toothless' prosthetic over and over again. Each turn we made was flawless and perfectly executed. Rocks passed by in a blur, and not once did I worry about hitting one. I knew that we'd get out without a scratch. My confidence provided the instinct I needed to predict where and when to turn next.

Toothless gave a triumphant, eagle-like cry as we flew out of the maze's exit and into a small fog bank. Emerging from the fog, I felt an overwhelming sense of elation. My first flight â€" and Toothless' first since I shot him down that fateful night â€" had gone better than I could ever imagine.

"Yeaaaaah!" I cried, sitting up on the saddle fully and raising both of my arms. Toothless gave a happy sort of warble and shot a blue fireball into the air as if in celebration.

My elation wore off almost immediately as I saw the fireball hit a left over spire and explode, leaving a huge nimbus of flames to linger in the sky. "Oh come on," I muttered exasperatedly, as Toothless and I flew straight into it.

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****Coast****

I blinked a few times, trying to ignore the slight burning sensation that my skin still experienced. My hair was scorched and wind-blown, and I was still a little dazed. But I tried to ignore it as Toothless and I relaxed in the sunset.

I heard Toothless begin to work his throat, and then proceed to vomit up half a fish for me to eat. "Uh, no thanks," I said casually, then held up my own fish. "I'm good."

Suddenly, there was a series of shrieks that pealed out into the otherwise silent air, and I saw a group of five Terrible Terrors flying right toward us. I heard Toothless growl as they landed, all scuttling at once toward the pile of fish Toothless held in front of him. Toothless growled again and pulled the fish closer to him possessively.

Not that the Terrors were in any way intimidated. Two of them worked together to grab a fish from Toothless, with one distracting him and the other snatching the fish. That particular Terror sat down a safe distance from the larger dragon and began to eat. However, he was challenged by one of his comrades, and was forced to spit a burst of fire in that Terror's direction.

Toothless and I had been watching the fight from the sidelines with amusement, when we both saw the fish pile move. I observed with curiosity, and Toothless with annoyance, as a Terror crawled out from the pile with a fish in its mouth. Quickly, Toothless grabbed the other end of the fish and yanked. The fish split apart at the tail, leaving the single fin in the Terror's mouth.

It sat comically on its rump as Toothless gave it a kind of gurgling laugh. The Terror wasn't amused. It spat out the fish tail, clawed the dirt, and rose up on its hind legs with a shriek. A burst of gas appeared at the back of its throat as it prepared to light its fire.

Toothless, with a bored look on his face, beat it to it, casually spitting a small fire bolt straight into the Terror's mouth. The gas exploded, causing the Terror to swell up and have steam whistling out of its nose and mouth. I chuckled uncontrollably.

"Not so fireproof on the inside, are you?" I asked the little dragon, which stumbled away from Toothless in a drunken manner. "Here you go," I added, throwing it my own fish.

The morsel landed right in front of it, instantly snapping it out of its daze. The Terror gulped the fish down whole, then approached me

curiously. I chose to relax, slumping down against Toothless while keeping my eye on the dragon.

Finally, its curiosity got the better of it, and the Terror climbed right up onto my lap. Like a scaly cat, it reached up with its head and gently nuzzled me, then settled down on my lap to rest.

I stared at the sleeping dragon in wonder. It was hard to believe that this creature and its relatives were the very same ones that I had once hoped to kill. That everyone hoped to kill. The idea was absurd to me now that I've been spending so much time with what I now knew as quite a lovable beast.

"Everything we know about you," I breathed, gently stroking the docile Terror, "is wrong."

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****I'm leaving this one up to you, readers - what should the Siren's fate be? Immediate death, or use in dragon training? Either way, I'm looking forward to seeing how he'll turn out.****

****Anyway, you know how it is with short chapters â€" the next will be published very soon! See you all then!****

9. Astrid's Discovery

****And this is where things threaten to fall apart for Hiccup and Toothless. But as we all know, it doesn't happen. Yet.****

****I have a math test coming up which I haven't studied for yetâ€¦ as Hiccup says, "Da da da, I'm dead."****

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****Arena****

Out came the Grapple Grounder from its cage with a loud roar. But this time, it was only Astrid and I in the arena. For this was to be the lesson that determined the single trainee who was ready to slay their first dragon.

My dad had visited me just last night. This had been the first time I had actually seen him since he left for the dragon's nest, and to be honest, I had been quite shocked when he first walked through the door. At first, from his initial words to me, I thought that he had discovered Toothless, but I soon found out that his ominous, threatening tone had been an entire jest.

In fact, he was delighted that I had become so proficient at "fighting" dragons. I tried to seem enthusiastic at his happy rambling, to seem enthusiastic that my father was finally talking and listening like any father would, but I couldn't. I was just too deadened down that he was so excited at the thought of his "useless" son finally going off to kill dragons.

But if there was one good thing that had come out of our talk, it was that Stoick had given me my very own Viking helmet. I had been overwhelmed until he had unceremoniously told me that it had been

made out of my late mother's breastplate. That had been an awkward revelation.

As the Grapple Grounder narrowly missed me with its sharp fangs, I realized that I had to stop daydreaming and try to stay alive. I ducked behind one of the multiple wooden boards set up around the arena, whose purpose was to be hidden behind to avoid the Grapple Grounder, who had enough of an impatient temperament to be reluctant to check behind all of them.

The dragon slithered around the perpetual maze of wood, and thankfully I wasn't protected. I flinched at a sudden impact that caused the board I was hiding behind to rock slightly, but relaxed somewhat when I saw that it was Astrid.

I backed away from her, not wanting to draw attention to myself but too late â€" she spotted me. "Stay out of my way," she said rudely, holding her axe up to my face in case I needed persuading. "I'm winning this thing."

She got up and proceeded to follow the Grapple Grounder stealthily around the arena, and I stood up but didn't follow her lead. "Sure, please, by all means!" I called after her â€" that wasn't sarcasm, but sincerity. I had no intention of winning the so-called honor of killing the dragon in the final exam.

But then the Grounder was charging right at me, jaws agape and tail thrashing madly in anticipation. I heard Astrid's battle cry, I heard my heart pounding as I screwed my eyes shut â€" and then the cheering of the crowd that had gathered reached my ears.

I opened my eyes to see the Grounder lying at my feet, tongue lolling out and tail wagging idly. "NO!" Astrid screeched in rage, then unleashed a flurry of curses that would make even Gobber wince.

Now that the fight was clearly over, I felt no particular need to be here any longer. "Soâ€| later!" I said with false cheerfulness. "Whoop, not so fast!" Gobber cautioned, picking me up with his hook and plonking me back down elsewhere.

I found myself next to Astrid again, and I tried to stay as far away from her as possible. She was in an absolute fury, with an enraged grimace on her face and a look in her eye that could have burned right through me. We exchanged glances, and what an unsettling experience that was â€" mine was nervous, and hers was murderous. She held up her axe again, leaving me no doubt what she'd do the second she got the opportunity.

I heard my dad's voice ring out above the cheering. "Quiet! The elder Goathi has decided!" I screwed my face up â€" I knew what was coming, who would be picked to kill the dragon. And I wasn't happy about the outcome.

Gobber held his hook over Astrid's head, silently asking the elder if she would be the chosen one. Goathi shook her head in an unsatisfied way. There were gasps and murmurs from the crowd. Astrid looked as if someone had slapped her.

Then Gobber pointed down at me with his remaining hand, a skeptical, questioning look on his face. Goathi nodded and pointed at me.

There it was. I would be killing a deadly Monstrous Nightmare this time tomorrow.

The crowd cheered even louder. I sighed. "That's my boy!" roared Stoick over the noise, something that should have made me happy, something I had never heard him say before. And I kind of hoped I never would again.

"Yeh've done it, Hiccup!" Gobber exclaimed, looking more excited than I had ever seen him. "Yeh get ta kill the dragon!" He grabbed onto my shoulder with his hook and shook me slightly, trying to get me riled up. I allowed a nervous smile to cross my face.

Everyone was cheering and shouting my name. Snoutlout punched me on the shoulder and Fishlegs hoisted me up on his own shoulder. The twins, who hardly ever got along with each other, butted heads together in celebration and cheered me on from either side of Fishlegs. Snaketail was positively beaming, doing little celebratory hops up and down and clapping her hands.

"Yes! Yes!" I kept saying, each time sounding more unenthusiastic than the last. But no one noticed, so great was their own enthusiasm. "Yes, I am so!"

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****Gorge****

"Leaving!" I finished, then called out to Toothless, who was momentarily nowhere in sight. "We're leaving! Let's pack up! the two of us are taking a little vacation â€" forever."

Yes, I was leaving Berk. There was no way that they'd get me to kill a dragon in front of the entire village â€" in front of my father. If there was one thing I'd learned from my time with Toothless, it was that dragons weren't the merciless killers I'd thought they were.

I had an empty basket on my shoulder. My plan was to first let Toothless know that we'd be leaving Berk permanently (allowing me to check up on him as well), and then running back to the village to swipe a whole bunch of fish for the journey.

I bent down behind a large boulder to put down the basket and readjust my riding gear. Once again, I had substituted my usual jacket for my self-made riding vest. I had a feeling I'd really need it.

A sound suddenly reached my ears, piercing the silence of the gorge. It was a long, low scraping noise that gave me goosebumps. The noise was close. Very, very close.

Cautiously, I glanced up. There, sitting on the boulder and sharpening her axe with a small rock, as if she didn't have a care in the world, was Astrid.

I shrieked and stood up. Making an effort to regain my composure, I coughed and asked innocently, "Wh-what are you doing here?"

She didn't look at me right away. Instead, she held her blade to the

light and examined it, whilst throwing away the stone. Finally, she said idly, "I want to know what's going on with you."

Wow, I never would have guessed, I thought, but of course I didn't say a word. Astrid hopped off of the rock and continued, more menacingly, "No one just gets as good as you do â€" _especially_ you." She shifted her axe from hand to hand and glared at me. I wisely tried to back off.

"Start talking," she ordered. "Are you training with someone? It better not involve thisâ€"|" she added, grabbing my riding vest. Futilely, I tried to play it cool. "Uh, I know _this_ looks really bad, but, uhâ€"|"

There was a sudden warble from the other side of the gorge. Momentarily, Astrid forgot about me and let go of my vest. Desperately, I started babbling, "Uh, OK, I'm through with the lies! I've been making, um, outfits!" Astrid didn't even glance my way, so focused was she on investigating whatever had made that noise.

I moved in front of her line of sight and continued frantically, "So, it's about time everyone knew. Go on, drag me backâ€"|" here we go" â€" Astrid glanced at me furiously and twisted my arm behind me before I could even blink. "ARGH!" I yelled in pain. "Why would you _do_ that?!"

Standing over me, Astrid viciously kicked me in the side. "That's for the lies," she growled, "and this" â€" she smashed the butt of her axe onto my vulnerable stomach â€" "is for everything else."

A screech suddenly rang out into the otherwise quiet air. "Oh, gods," I said under my breath as Astrid went to investigate further. I followed.

Coming up over the next hill, I saw the dark shape of Toothless sitting in the grass peacefully. Suddenly, he seemed to have detected us, for he lifted his head curiously. Those startling green eyes were the first thing Astrid saw. She gasped and screamed, "Get down!"

She threw me to the ground. I heard an angry shriek from behind us, and then the sound of Toothless bounding across the ground, responding to what he thought was an attack against me. I hastily got back up in time to see that the Night Fury was almost on top of us.

"Hiccup, run!" yelled Astrid, readying her axe. Desperately, I threw myself at her, ripping the weapon out of her grasp and throwing it aside. Before she could react, I got between her and the enraged Toothless, waving my arms wildly in an attempt to calm him down.

"No, Toothless, she's a friend!" I told him frantically, and he stopped his wild flapping and leaping to gaze at me skeptically. "Trust me," I said soothingly, and he calmed down completely, throwing the bewildered Astrid a savage glare over my shoulder.

"What is going on?" asked Astrid, fear making her voice almost hysterical. "You just scared him," I said, as if that explained everything. "_I_ scared _him_?!" she exclaimed in response, then all

of a sudden calmed herself. "Just whoâ€¦ is _him_?" she added, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Knowing that this probably wouldn't help, I hesitantly introduced, "Uh, Astridâ€¦ Toothless! Toothlessâ€¦ Astrid." The dragon behind me glared even more ferociously and snarled loudly, immediately contradicting his name.

Astrid looked confused for a second, then gave me a look that clearly said, _You're so dead._ Then, she turned and ran for the exit.

When she left, I turned to Toothless, who looked smugly satisfied. "Da da da, we're dead," I commented. Toothless simply scuttled back to his previous spot, unconcerned. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!" I protested. "Where do you think you're going? Come on, Toothless, we need to stop her!"

-.--.-.-.

****Berk Woods (Astrid's POV)****

Hiccup has a dragon! That singular thought echoed again and again in my mind incessantly, driving me to run faster. I needed to tell someone, even if they didn't believe me. _Let's be honest, who would?_

But there was no denying that Hiccup would get what he deserved. Even if no one did believe me when I told them of his traitorous actions, I would give it to him myself. He would pay for everything â€" for besting me in dragon training, for allying himself with a dragon, and just because I hated him.

So preoccupied was I that I didn't hear the beating of powerful wings just behind me.

The Night Fury's claws roughly seized me by the shoulders. I screamed as I was lifted straight up into the air. "Oh, great Odin's ghost! Oh, this is it!" I shouted over the turbulent wind. We climbed higher, my legs dangling uselessly underneath me. As my feet began to scrape the treetops, I let out a scream, longer and louder than I'd ever screamed before.

They're â€" he's â€" abducting me so I won't tell anyone. Of course. That's just what I would have done, said the rational side of my mind. The rest of my mind was too busy concentrating on emptying my lungs to think properly.

Finally, the harrowing flight was over. The dragon landed high in a tree, dropping me just above a sturdy-looking limb. I instantly made a grab for it, and relaxed somewhat when my fingers wrapped around the bark.

"Hiccup!" I screeched, suddenly enraged. "Get me _down_ from here!" It didn't occur to me that I was hardly in a position to order him around. But it just came naturally.

"You have to give me a chance to explain!" came the pleading reply. I almost scoffed. Even more furiously, I roared, "I am _not_ listening to _anything_ you say!"

I expected him to fly off on his dragon and leave me there. But instead, he held up a hand and said gently, "Then I won't speak. Just let me show you." He paused, then added, "Please, Astrid?"

I looked down thoughtfully at the ground, such a far distance below. Defiance gripped me just then. I glared back up at Hiccup and said simply, "No."

He didn't look mad or upset. Instead, he seemed disappointed. "Fine then," he murmured, and the Night Fury spread its wings to take off. But before it could jump out of the tree, I felt a sudden desperation. "Wait!" I called, and to my eternal relief, the Night Fury lowered its wings.

Using all of my strength, I hauled myself up onto the branch. Balancing expertly, I cautiously stood up to my full height and made my way over to Hiccup's position. He was staring at me curiously. I scowled at him and slapped away his hand, which he had offered to me in order to, presumably, help me up.

The Night Fury growled menacingly, warning me not to hurt him. I found it odd that a dragon would be protecting a Viking, but I kept that to myself.

I hoisted myself up onto the dragon's back " I now saw that there was a saddle in place. I took about half a second to marvel at its quality, then put a nervous hand on Hiccup's shoulder as a precaution. "Now get me down," I told him in a tremulous voice.

"Toothless, down," Hiccup told the dragon, slowly and clearly. Then he added with emphasis, "Gently." Obediently, the Night Fury spread its wings and readied for takeoff.

"See?" said Hiccup confidently. "Nothing to worry about." I heard the dragon give an ominous growl, and something told me that I wouldn't like what would happen next.

I was right. The dragon launched itself straight up into the sky. I panicked, lost my balance, and was suddenly dangling completely upside down with both hands gripping the sides of the saddle with all of their might.

"No, bad dragon!" Hiccup shouted, or at least I think he did " I was too busy screaming in terror to notice. I desperately reached out with my hands and found Hiccup's face. It was better than nothing, and I pulled myself right side up on the saddle with some effort. "He's not usually like this," he attempted to explain as I readjusted my grip on his torso instead. "Oh, no!" he muttered, and then the dragon folded its wings and dropped like a rock.

My scream reached its peak, and then was cut off abruptly as the tumultuous waters of the ocean raced up to meet us. I managed to grab a breath just as the Night Fury dove beneath the water, the shock almost knocking me out. Almost instantly, we surfaced, only to briefly dive under again.

"What are you doing?!" Hiccup screamed the second we came up again. "We need her to like us!" Apparently not listening to a word he said, the dragon shot up into the sky again, with the ferocious wind

quickly ripping the moisture from our sodden clothes.

In what seemed like a very good but not very successful attempt to get us off of its back, the Night Fury began spinning relentlessly, until it felt like my previous lunch was in my throat. "And now the spinning," Hiccup commented dryly, somehow managing to retain his sarcastic sense of humor even during this terrifying situation.

"Thank you for nothing, you useless reptile!" he suddenly shouted, just before the dragon plummeted again, this time tumbling this way and that until the entire world seemed to be spinning completely out of control.

"We're going to die, we're going to die!" the thought pounded in my head until it became unbearable. I couldn't take another moment of this heart-stopping experience. "OK, I'm sorry!" I screeched, squeezing my eyes shut and burying my face in Hiccup's neck. "I'm sorry for everything I've done to you! Just please, please get me off of this thing!"

We were going to hit the water any second now. Even though my eyes were closed, I could still feel us spinning dizzily. I braced myself.

And abruptly, everything stopped. I exclaimed in shock, and all was silent. Even the wind seemed to have gone.

Slowly, cautiously, I opened my eyes just a sliver. And once they were open, they widened so fast I couldn't even remember opening them fully.

It was like we had entered a different world. Time must have passed more quickly than I thought because the sun was setting over the horizon, casting a sparkling glow on the ocean beneath us. There was no wind, and the Night Fury glided leisurely on the warm, still air.

Within moments, I was hypnotized. Below us, the island of Berk seemed to glow and become radiant in the orange light of the sunset. Lazily rising into the sky, the Night Fury took us into a cloud bank, and we were suddenly surrounded on all sides by clouds. Even if my eyes were bigger, I still wouldn't have been able to take it all in.

Speechless with awe, I averted my gaze to a cloud just above us. Tentatively, I reached up and lightly touched the cloud. Feeling nothing, I thrust my hand deeper, and was astonished to feel that the cloud was wet, like a thick mist. I instantly loved the feeling, and I reached up with both hands and delightfully waved them around, feeling the refreshing mist cool them.

It was like this for an hour at least. I think Hiccup was as enraptured as I was in the breathtaking scenery. The entire time, I didn't say a word, simply staring in rapt wonder as new sights came into view with every flick of the Night Fury's wings and tail.

The next time we rose, it was already nighttime. If I had been speechless before, now I was completely bewitched. Stars were breaking out all over, and the chilly night air felt brisk and fresh.

as I breathed it in. To add to the spectacular beauty of it all, a huge wave of color blossomed on the endless canvas that was the sky. It was the Aurora Borealis, or northern lights.

I didn't think it could get any more beautiful. How wrong I was â€" the clouds beneath us suddenly parted, and I could see the village of Berk far beneath us. The numerous torches that brought light to the village dotted island like a hundred fireflies, or a group of stars brought to earth.

The dragon carved a neat, flawless turn over the village and flew back over the ocean. I honestly didn't want this to end. A cold wind washed over us, and I found myself hugging Hiccup closer for comfort.

"I admit it," I murmured, "this is pretty cool. It's absolutely amazing." I patted the Night Fury's flank fondly, and it looked over its shoulder and gently scoured me with its brilliant green eyes. Why did we Vikings hate these magnificent beasts again? I couldn't remember for the life of me.

But that thought ruined the magic of this flight and brought me crashing back to reality. Hiccup was going to have to kill a dragon in the arena tomorrow. I understood that Hiccup would never kill a dragon now that he had become such a companion to this Night Fury. I could see now that he had helped the dragon to fly by creating a kind of artificial fin to replace the one it originally had.

"Hiccup, what are you going to do?" I asked him. "Your final exam is tomorrow! You know you're going to have to kill" â€" I paused and realized that the Night Fury probably wouldn't want to hear this. I continued my statement in a whisper, "â€"kill a dragon."

All of a sudden, I felt the Night Fury tense slightly. But I didn't pay attention, instead focusing on Hiccup's reply. "Don't remind me," he almost groaned. "I'm completely trapped. I was going to leave the island with Toothless and find somewhere else to make our homeâ€" but now, I don't know if that's such a good ideaâ€"!"

Just then, the Night Fury suddenly shrieked and dove into a thickening fog bank. Where was he going? And why did I suddenly feel such dread?

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****Normally, I'd call this a cliff hanger, but we all know what happens next.****

****Additionally, I decided to leave out the part where Stoick and Hiccup talk. Booooooring.****

****Plus, I was impatient to get the story on.****

****Review please, and wait for the next chapter!****

10. Shocking Revelations

****The fact that the dragon raids are controlled by a huge queen dragon would shock any Viking. And the fact that Hiccup is on good**

terms with the dragons will certainly be shocking for the inhabitants of Berk. **

Neither of these things should shock **_you_****, readers. But I've got a "shocking revelation" of my own invention for you.**

Hel's Gate (Hiccup's POV)

Down into the fog we flew, until the obscuring cloud grew so thick I couldn't see my hands in front of my face. "Toothless, where are you going?" I asked him, but the dragon ignored me.

I could almost feel his anxiety as he powerfully beat his wings, plunging us even deeper into the mist. He was almost as scared as Astrid was â€" I could hear her uneven, shuddery breathing rasping in my ear as she tightly hugged me close.

I was about to say something else to Toothless when he suddenly veered to the left. The reason for this suddenly became clear â€" a huge Monstrous Nightmare lurched out from the fog on our right with a growl. A huge fish was clutched in its claws.

"Get down!" I whispered urgently to Astrid, and the two of us quickly pressed ourselves against Toothless' back, trying not to be seen.

All of a sudden, two Gronckles bumbled out from behind us, each with a few fish hanging out of their mouths. Then came a Grapple Grounder, a Nadder, a Zippleback â€" even a Skrill melted out of the fog, with its skin crackling with electricity and a horrid wailing cry emanating from its jaws.

Then, the fog in front of us cleared ever so slightly. I gasped silently as I picked out dozens upon dozens of dragons ahead of us, all communicating to each other with gurgles, roars, and chirps. Each dragon had something in its talons.

I took a closer look at the Monstrous Nightmare beside us, and in particular, the fish in its talons. "It looks like they're hauling in their kills," I murmured, as much to myself as to Astrid. "Umâ€|" she whispered back in a voice shaking with terror, "what does that make us?"

Fear took hold of me. Was Toothless bringing us toâ€| wherever he was taking us to, in order to be eaten by other dragons? Then the moment of fear passed â€" I knew that Toothless would never do such a thing to me, or to Astrid.

I sighed quietly at this revelation, and the soft noise made the Zippleback on our left take notice. One of its heads turned curiously, took note of Toothless, and bumped the other head, telling it to look over. Now both heads were glaring at Toothless as if saying, _Look who's back._

The fog thickened again, causing us to lose sight of all but a few dragons. Our little squad of reptiles suddenly made a banking turn, and then another one. Each time we turned, we narrowly missed a rock spire sticking up from the water. I now knew where we were, and the realization made my blood run cold.

"We're inside Hel's Gate," I whispered, and I felt Astrid shudder. "The dragon's nest," she added frightfully.

All at once, the fog cleared, opening up for us as if in welcome. Ahead was a tall, dark mountain rising up from a barren island. Rivers of lava trickled down its slopes, and smoke billowed from its top. Upon seeing this island, the dragons seemed to gain a new energy. They increased their speed in unison, diving into a huge, rock tunnel carved into the side of the volcano.

Astrid and I screamed as Toothless suddenly dove down, down into the blackness of the tunnel. But it didn't last long — his flight evened out just as the walls became suffused with an ominous orange light.

Then, the tunnel yawned wide, opening into a massive cave. It was stifling hot, and red-tinged mist rose from the bottom of the cave. It was so deep, I couldn't make myself look down. The air vibrated with a massive warbling; the sound of hundreds of dragon voices sounding together as if they were singing.

"What my dad wouldn't give to see this," I breathed in awe. Astrid was speechless. Toothless swiveled his head this way and that as he stared down into the glowing hole, as if searching for something. Something that he was terribly frightened of.

The dragons ahead of us were diving down toward the hole and dropping their prey in. As his turn arrived, Toothless swooped close to the mist, and then suddenly shot upwards and carved a wide turn up towards the top of the cave. He landed on a hidden rock ledge and retreated into the shadows. We were completely obscured from the other dragons, except for a Devious Snaptrapper that looked over at us with all four sets of eyes.

Watching a Nadder drop a dead sheep into the glowing crevasse, I commented dryly, "Well, it's satisfying to know that all of our food has been dumped down a hole."

Astrid, when she spoke, sounded mystified. "They're not eating any of it," she muttered to me. "Maybe they're storing it for winter, like we do."

I laughed quietly. "Or maybe it's a massive sacrifice for some dragon god," I joked.

I had spoken too soon. A small Gronckle, barely old enough to fly, clumsily made its way to the hole. Scratching itself behind the ear, it dropped a single mackerel into the depths below, looking immensely proud of itself.

But then, a huge growl emanated up from the abyss. The Gronckle stiffened up immediately and slowly bumbled away. However, it wasn't nearly fast enough to escape the titanic set of jaws that rose up from the mist and snapped around the fleeing dragon with an echoing *crack*.

There was an instant reaction from the dragons watching. They ducked into the shadows, behind rocks, into their caves. A flock of Whispering Deaths burrowed into the cave walls. Even a Blundertail

ran and hid from the behemoth!

"Whatâ€¦ is thatâ€¦?" Astrid asked, and I didn't have an answer. Gurgling in a satisfied way, the gigantic dragon lowered its head back into its hole. It rose again, poking its nose up out of the mist, bathed in red light. A massive belch blasted out from between its terrifying teeth.

"Toothless, you have to get us out of here," I whispered urgently. The Night Fury gave no response. I saw the giant dragon's nostrils furiously working, and, with an immense chill down my spine, saw it turn its head toward our hiding place. Its eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Now!" I screamed, and Toothless obeyed in an instant. He leapt up for the exit, just avoiding the titan's massive jaws as it lunged for us. The hundreds of dragons began to take off in sheer terror, flocking together for the exit as well. Soon the passage was blocked by a huge swarm of them. We couldn't escape.

I could hear the dragon god's claws pounding on the cave walls as it climbed after us. Terror shot through me as I felt Toothless suddenly stop ascending, and I thought that the creature's jaws had closed around Toothless' tail.

But then, with a surge of complete relief, I realized that my foot had slipped from the stirrup. I clicked the stirrup into the right position, and we instantly shot through the fleeing mob of dragons. Behind us, the dragon god's jaws closed on an unlucky Zippleback instead.

As soon as we were clear of the volcano, we broke away from the rest of the dragons and instantly made for Berk. _They don't come much closer than that,_ I thought exhaustedly.

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****Arena (Siren's POV)****

A sound woke me up from my fitful sleep within the cage. "What is it?" I complained, uncoiling my body to its full length. From another cage, I could hear Hookfang's muffled voice explain sleepily, "Someone's coming."

Stormfly squawked in annoyance in response. "Great. I just fell asleep." The Zippleback twins, Barf and her brother Belch, sang in unison, "Now she's going to complain endlessly. You know how she gets." There was no reply from Meatlug or Horrocow, as they were both peacefully snoring.

Soon, I heard the footsteps even from behind the door that caged me. I had been sitting in here for hours, ever since this morning. Once more, I silently cursed the human boy and the Night Fury that had gotten me into this mess.

Then came the sound of the lock unlatching, and the door creaked open slightly. Narrowing my eyes at what I thought was a trap, I shapeshifted into my humanoid form and pushed the door open cautiously.

There was the large Viking, the one with only two limbs. He had been the one at the Viking chieftain's side when I had been captured. In the back of my mind, I noted that his name was Gobber. As I glared silently at him, I could hear the sleepy voices of the other caged dragons in the background. Obviously, this arena generally didn't get much activity at night.

"Okay, yeh demon," he growled at me. "Yeh're probably wonderin' why I'm here." I raised an eyebrow skeptically and shot back, "Like you Vikings really need a reason to capture and kill innocent beings."

That made Gobber laugh sarcastically. "Innocent?" he sputtered. "Yeh destroyed a house fer no reason!" I snarled inwardly as I remembered the Night Fury and his human rider.

I wish he had died that night, when the Red Death had sent him on a raid with the other dragons with that very intention. I had been sent, in turn, to Berk to check if the Night Fury really was dead. I had used the opportunity to abandon the nest forever, living a secret life in the Berk forest. What a shock it had been when the hated Night Fury came blazing over my clearing in the middle of the day!

But Gobber's voice brought me out of my thoughts. "I've come ta ask yeh, on behalf of the Chief, whether or not yeh know anything about the dragon nest." I sneered confidently, "Yes, I know a thing or two." I had no intention of revealing anything to the Vikings, even though I had no loyalty to the Red Death.

Predictably, Gobber asked for more specific information. I responded with, "The only thing I'm going to say is, that if you indeed find the nest eventuallyâ€¦ you'll wish you hadn't."

Gobber wasn't impressed. "We've killed plenty o'dragons before," he said. "I really don't think an army of 'em'll be too hard ta drive off." Flexing my wings, I grinned savagely at him. "How many Blundertails live in the nest again?" I asked loudly to myself. "About fifteen or twenty, if I recall. And if I'm not mistaken, one of them took off your hand and leg."

The large Viking nodded wisely. "Yeah, that it did. What about you? Yeh've got a pretty impressive scar yerself."

Involuntarily, my clawed hand went up to the jagged, dark red scar that wound around my neck like a terrible necklace. "Thanks," I said grudgingly. "It was inflicted a year ago by Dagur the Deranged. I was lucky to live."

Gobber was silent for a second or two. He ruined the tender moment by growling, "If yeh aren't gonna tell me anything, get back in yer cage. Yeh'll be facin' the chief's son tomorrow."

Once again, I gave him my most malicious grin. "I'll enjoy ripping that vulgar Viking's offspring to pieces in front of him. If I'm going to die, I'm going to take his most precious possession with me."

There were roars of approval from the other dragons.

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****Gorge (Hiccup's POV)****

"You're right, it totally makes sense now!" Astrid exclaimed to me as we came in for a landing. "It's like a giant beehive! The ordinary dragons are the workers, and that's their queen! It controls them!"

We hopped off of Toothless, and Astrid immediately ran for the exit. "Let's find your dad!" she said excitedly. I stopped and instantly cried out, "No! No, you can't!" There was no way we could inform Stoick about the dragon's nest without revealing Toothless' existence.

"Please," I continued as Astrid turned and stared skeptically at me, "they'll kill Toothless! We need to figure something out."

Now Astrid was looking even more skeptically at me. "Hiccup," she said in disbelief, "we've just discovered the dragon's nest! The thing we've been after since Vikings first sailed here! And you want to keep it a secret?! To protect your pet dragon? Are you serious?!"

I was serious. "Yes," I told her, determination making my voice strong.

I couldn't describe her face when she heard this - it softened until there was no semblance to the old, tough-as-nails Astrid in her expression. She looked surprised and almost frightened. It was as if I was now the tough one, and she was the weak one.

"OK," she finally said, quietly. "So what do we do?" I was amazed. Astrid, who had despised me just a few hours ago, was now willing to help me protect Toothless.

"Just give me until tomorrow," I replied to her question. "I'll know what to do by then." I looked away from her, and turned my gaze to the lake. The moon was full, and the water sparkled with its reflection.

Then - BAM! Astrid slugged me on the arm, hard. "That's for kidnapping me," she stated matter-of-factly. Toothless looked up from where he was drinking and growled. I shrugged at him.

All of a sudden, Astrid rushed the few paces between us and hugged me tightly around the neck. "That's for everything else," she murmured.

Before I could recover my voice, she let go and ran off into the darkness.

Toothless came up behind me with a curious look on his face. "What?" I asked. "What are you looking at?"

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****(Toothless' POV)****

I watched the girl leave. This "Astrid" had initially seemed hostile, but now that I knew that she didn't want to cause me or Hiccup harm anymore, I found myself warming up to her.

I glanced curiously at Hiccup. He was watching her leave with a blank expression on his face and a soft smile.

What happened then was strange. It was as if I could feel everything Hiccup was feeling. It was then that I knew of his emotional history with the girl — his lifelong infatuation with her, which had recently petered down to almost nothing. But I knew that some of that old feeling remained within him. He probably didn't realize it, but he still liked her.

I swore right then and there that I'd help Hiccup realize this, and confess it to Astrid, no matter how long it took.

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****Arena (Hiccup's POV)****

The cheering of the crowd was deafening, incessant, and torturous. Everyone on the island had turned up to watch me kill my first dragon. Whether it was that fact, or the fact that I had to actually kill a dragon, that was making me sick, I didn't know.

I had woken up that morning in a good enough mood. It was only after wolfing down a small bluefin tuna for breakfast that my dad had reminded me that my final dragon training exam was this morning. Then every second leading up to this moment had felt like the bluefin was trying to swim back up my throat.

Now, hiding in the shadows of the small tunnel leading up to the arena, I made my decision. I wasn't going to kill the Nightmare — I was going to show everyone what dragons were really like. I was going to show them that they could be tamed and befriended.

What I was doing had its risks, but as I told Astrid yesterday, I was through with the lies. Within the hour, everyone would know the truth.

"Well, I can show my face in public again!" I heard Stoick's voice boom over the crowd, and everyone laughed. The chatter died down to nothing as he continued with his speech. And with every word, I couldn't help feeling more and more ashamed.

"If anyone had told me that, within a few short weeks, Hiccup would go from being — well, Hiccup, to placing first in dragon training, then I would've tied 'em to a mast, and shipped 'em off for fear they'd gone mad!" The crowd roared again with laughter, to which Stoick finished, "And you all know it, too!"

But as the laughter lowered to a murmur, my dad became more serious. "But here we are," he started again, solemnly. "And no one is more surprised — or more proud — than I am. Today, my boy becomes a Viking. Today, he becomes one of us!"

The crowd cheered its loudest yet. I don't think I could have felt

more guilty.

A voice from behind me made me jump. "Be careful with that dragon," said Astrid softly. "Oh, it's not the dragon I'm really worried about," I replied nonchalantly. I cast a fearful glance at my father. _How is he going to react to what I am about to reveal? _I asked myself.

I didn't know. And that was what worried me so.

"What are you going to do?" Astrid pressed. I replied in the same emotionless voice, "Put an end to this. I have to try."

I turned to her at last. Her face was the same soft and frightened one that she had shown last night. "Astrid," I began, unsure of how to go on, "if somethingâ€¦ goes wrongâ€¦ please make sure that they don't find Toothless."

Her face became tougher, but not by much. "I will," she said loyally. "But justâ€¦ just promise me it won't go wrong." Her face didn't change this time, but her eyes became desperate.

I wanted to reassure her that things would be fine. But I couldn't form the words to tell her.

Gobber suddenly appeared, looking just as jolly as ever. "It's time, Hiccup," he said cheerily. "Knock 'em dead." Astrid looked almost panicked, but she held herself back.

Slowly, hesitantly, I strode into the arena. Lifting my helmet onto my head, I tried to seem brave, and ready for the task. The crowd's cheer reached its maximum, and Gobber closed the gate leading to the arena. I was locked in, and the company I'd be getting would be far from pleasant.

I saw the other teens watching eagerly from their vantage point. They all looked beyond excited, but I knew that it would change. Finally, I made my way over to the weapon rack, and grabbed a shield and a dagger.

I could hear my dad mutter something to Gobber, but I was too far away to hear. I screwed up my courage with a long inhale through my nose. "I'm ready," I said clearly, not willing to betray any of my fear.

A cage door unlocked with a long, ominous creak. But something stopped me short. That wasn't the Monstrous Nightmare's cage, was it? I heard a soft hiss curl out from behind the door, and I knew that it _definitely_ wasn't a Nightmare inside of that cage.

Then the cage unlocked fully, and a giant, eel-like beast burst out from the chamber beyond. I gasped audibly â€" it was a Siren. Not _a_ Siren, but _the_ Siren. The same one that had chased Toothless and I across Berk.

The Siren shrieked shrilly, then threw himself up toward the overhanging net, coiling in and around the links. He moved smoothly through each and every gap, slithering at a remarkable speed. He showed just how powerful he was by shooting a jet of bright red flame at the gathered crowd, which parted just in time.

I knew why they were in such a rush to get out of the way. According to the rumors, a Siren's fire was weak, but could burn without either oxygen or fuel. Those crimson flames could even burn for up to a minute underwater, and if they had both adequate oxygen and kindling, they could potentially burn forever. If they touched something even moderately flammable, such as a Viking's clothing, they wouldn't be doused or smothered. They would burn until there was nothing left, not even bones.

I gulped. That slight sound caused the Siren's head to swivel my way. He squinted suspiciously. Did he recognize me? "Go on, Hiccup, give it to 'im!" called a Viking from the crowd.

Then the Siren's eyes widened in surprise. Yep, he recognized me. But then I noticed something I hadn't noticed before â€" an ugly red scar wrapping around his neck. _Did I cause that, when the Siren crashed during the chase?_ I wondered.

But no matter â€" it seemed that the dragon was more than eager to get his revenge. With a horrible screech, he uncoiled from the net and dropped down to the ground, instantly slithering toward me. Before I could even raise my shield, he was coiling around me, binding me until I could scarcely move. In a second, I knew, he would squeeze me hard enough to snap me in two.

I noticed that my left hand wasn't trapped beside my waist like my right was. I gingerly raised it in a calming gesture, silently indicating to the Siren that I meant no harm. Confused but still hostile, he snapped at my fingers with his needle-like teeth.

With a slight jolt, I realized that my shield was still attached to my arm. I frantically shook it off, and it fell to the ground with a loud clatter. I raised my arm again soothingly, and this time the Siren uncoiled himself and let me free.

Now I dropped my dagger. I didn't even notice the muttering crowd. I was totally focused on the Siren, which was now watching me suspiciously, thoughts of revenge forgotten. "It's OK, it's OKâ€|" I kept muttering to him, holding my hand out again.

The Siren's gaze became soft. His slitted pupils widened by the slightest margin. Now no longer afraid, I couldn't help but marvel at the way his emerald-and-blue scales gleamed in the sunlight. In order to win his confidence entirely, I'd have to drop the only thing I hadn't yet dropped.

My helmet.

"I'm not one of them," I decreed in a voice as strong as the metal of the helmet. I picked it up and tossed it aside like so much scrap. The Siren gazed at me with confusion, but he quickly became peaceful. He nosed his head toward mine.

I knew that all was forgiven. I knew that the dragon had forgiven me entirely. I knew that he knew I was a friend. A friend to all dragons.

"Stop the fight," ordered Stoick, eyes like stone. I could see that he had seen enough. "No!" I told him in a surprisingly fierce voice.

"I want all of you to see this!"

My voice softened as I made contact with the Siren's snout. Many Vikings gasped.

"They aren't what we think they are," I said with complete confidence. "We don't have to kill them."

There were more gasps, and the Siren slowly morphed into his human form. There he was — the same creature that had so fiercely bared his fangs at me that day, the one that had tried to rip me from Toothless' saddle. He smiled, a real, genuine smile, and his wing reached out to brush my shoulder.

The peaceful moment was completely shattered. "I said STOP THE FIGHT!" roared Stoick, furiously pounding his hammer on the metal bars ringing the arena.

The series of loud clangs startled the Siren. He shrieked and flew backwards, flailing with his clawed hands for balance. He fell against the wall, and by chance, his claw caught the locking mechanism of a cage and pulled down.

The door instantly burst open. Out came a raging Monstrous Nightmare, bellowing its fury at the screaming crowd. Instantly noticing me, it charged, claws scraping and jaws snapping. I yelled in terror and ran aimlessly, trying to escape.

"Hiccup!" came Astrid's scream, but I could barely hear it. I desperately picked up a shield, only to have the Nightmare rip it out of my grasp and continue the chase. The Siren shrieked again, flying right into his cage and slamming the door shut behind him.

A hammer flew out from nowhere, bashing the incensed Nightmare right in the face. Getting up, it immediately saw that Astrid was the cause of the disturbance and barreled toward her, talons madly scrabbling across the rocky floor.

The arena gate was heaved open by Stoick. I saw him motion to us and shout, "This way!" Abandoning my previous trajectory, I ran for him, desperate and hoping to get out of the arena alive.

Stoick grabbed Astrid and threw her aside where she would be safe. He held out his hand to me, and just as I grabbed it, the Monstrous Nightmare shot its sticky fire at us. The flame splatted against the post next to us, throwing me off balance. Not even a second later, the enraged dragon was on top of me, pinning me to the ground with its claw.

Just as I thought I was a complete goner, I heard a familiar noise. It was a high, keening screech that started out quiet and grew gradually louder. As the screech reached its apex, there was a blinding burst of blue fire, and smoke and dust completely filled the arena.

"Night Fury!" shouted Gobber, as through the smoke, I could see the Nightmare being pulled away from me. The sounds of furious roaring and growling could be heard, and when the smoke cleared, I saw the unmistakable form of Toothless clinging on to the much larger dragon.

The Monstrous Nightmare reached back with its jaws, trying to bite Toothless. His response was to pull on the Nightmare's neck and send it tumbling down on top of him. After a brief struggle, Toothless succeeded in kicking the Nightmare off of him.

The Monstrous Nightmare roared defiantly, to which Toothless responded with a wild snarl and a slash from his claws. _He's protecting me,_ I realized in awe. He put on such a terrifying display that the Nightmare reluctantly retreated, backing into the shadows of its cage.

But the danger was far from over. Several Vikings dropped through the gap in the steel net, with the intention of capturing or possibly killing Toothless. I couldn't let that happen!

"Stop! He won't hurt you!" I called desperately, as Toothless relentlessly kicked two warriors away. I cried out again, but no one heard me. Stoick now joined the fray, axe in hand, charging into the battle.

"Toothless, no!" I screamed, as his eyes narrowed at the sight of the new threat. He ignored me, rushing straight at my father. With amazing speed, he tackled him to the ground, pinning him under his talons.

I could only watch in horror as a blue light emanated from Toothless' mouth, and his distinctive shriek came again. All of a sudden, I found my voice, and I shouted with everything I had.

"NOOOO!" I called desperately, and this time, Toothless heard me. He lowered his head and gazed at me apologetically. For just a moment, it was just another moment between the two of us.

Then, he was overtaken. A Viking held his head tightly to the ground so he couldn't breathe fire, and others secured his wings and tail. I tried to help Toothless, but Astrid was there by my side, gently but firmly holding me back. "Pleaseâ€¦ just don't hurt himâ€¦" I whispered hoarsely.

But even if they could hear me, I knew they wouldn't listen.

-.---.--.

(Ruffnut's POV)

I know I couldn't speak for anyone else, but it was safe to say that we were completely speechless. Again.

Apparently, it wasn't enough for Hiccup to shock us once, when he suddenly displayed a miraculous talent for fighting dragons a couple of weeks ago â€" but today was something else. He was able to _tame_ one of the most ferocious dragons ever, and claim that dragons weren't evil! And to top even that, a _Night Fury_ with a _saddle_ came roaring out of nowhere to _protect_ him!

I could see the others' expressions now â€" Snotlout's face was blank, my brother was flabbergasted, and Fishlegs seemed dazed. But Astrid didn't look surprised at all.

Although I would never ever admit it to anyone else, I knew deep down that I had always liked Hiccup. Even when we were little, I just feltâ€¦ drawn to him. It would positively make my day whenever I made him smile. I guess it was just because he was different from everyone else I knew.

But then, as we grew older, I found that I had to hide my feelings deeper and deeper so no one else would suspectâ€¦ but the more I hid them, the stronger they would become. One time when me and my brother had tied him to a tree upside down, with all of the others laughing at him, it broke my heart when I realized that I had to laugh too.

Then just a few weeks ago, I finally got the chance to let some of my feelings out. Everyone was impressed with the scrawny boy's sudden talent at dragon fighting, and that meant that I could, at last, show that I liked him. I had to make it look that I had _just_ become interested in him, so I flirted with him every chance I got.

And nowâ€¦ now that Hiccup had done something so traitorous, and at the same time, so braveâ€¦ I didn't feel any anger, or disappointment, or the need to banish him with the other Outcasts.

Now I was truly impressed. I fell so deeply in love with him that it made my head spin.

As the others walked away from the arena, in intense discussion with each other, only Astrid and I remained. I wanted to watch how Hiccup would defend himself against his father. I wanted to see him do something even more impressive.

And when this mess was all over, I wanted to tell him how I had always felt about him. That I loved him.

-.-.-.-.

****I guess I owe you all a little explanation.****

****A few months ago, I found an old HTTYD fanfic called "The Zippleback." It basically told the twins' point of view of the events just after the battle with the Red Death. At the end of the short little story, I ended up feeling very, very sorry for Ruffnut.****

****I apologize, Hiccstrid fans. But we can all agree that Ruffnut deserves some of the affection.****

****That aside, it looks like we have a new character developingâ€¦****

****Can any of you take the suspense? You'd better, because the next chapter won't be coming for a while. Review please, and I'll see you soon!****

11. To Trust a Siren

****In this chapter, I decide to take a little detour from the main story.****

****Hiccup and his new friends start training their dragons for flight, a new character is technically introduced (guess who), and a bit of romance starts to blossom.****

****Speaking of which, I originally intended to have Ruffnut pair up with Hiccup, but I wisely backed out of the idea. Unfortunately, that isn't going to stop her from trying.****

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****(Hiccup's POV)****

If anyone had asked me at any time before now what scared me the most, my answer would have been "an angry Nightmare". But if someone had asked me that right now, it would have been "an angry father".

I had never seen Stoick so mad. I've always imagined, that if he got this mad, he'd yell. But he was quieter than I had thought, and that was what scared me.

"I should have known," he muttered under his breath as Toothless was chained and put on the sidelines. "I should have seen the signs!" As my dad paced impatiently around the arena, other Vikings watched, looking at me with disbelief and anger. I glanced up and to the side, and saw Astrid and Ruffnut watching me.

"We had a deal!" Stoick suddenly raged at me, and I responded in my defense, "Yes, but that was before!" oh, it's so messed up." I wasn't good at talking in a crisis.

"So everything in the ring," my father began, "was a trick?! A lie?!" I frantically tugged at my hair, desperate to explain things properly, even though I knew Stoick wouldn't listen no matter what. "I screwed up! I was going to tell you before now, but!" please, blame me, be mad at me! Just please don't hurt Toothless!"

That was enough to drive my dad into a bigger rage. "The dragon is what you're worried about?" he asked in disbelief. "Not the people you almost killed?!"

I never thought I'd see the day when I actually became angry, but that day, that time was now. Rage threatened to consume me, and I had to physically hold myself back from doing something violent. "He was protecting me! Toothless isn't dangerous!"

I knew that I was just making things worse. "They've killed hundreds of us!" Stoick roared. "We've killed thousands of them!" I screeched back at him. Stoick only rolled his eyes and shook his head in exasperation.

"They defend themselves, that's all!" I continued to protest futilely. "They raid us because they have to! If they don't bring enough food back to their island, they'll be eaten themselves!"

I was suddenly aware of every pair of Viking eyes on me. Too late, I slapped a hand to my mouth. "You've been to the nest?" asked Stoick in a dangerous whisper. "Uh, did I say nest?" I made a lame attempt to cover up my slip.

"How did you find it?" my father demanded. "I-I didn't!" I stammered, unsure if I'd get into even more trouble for this. "Toothless did! On-only a dragon can find the island."

Damn it.

My father got look on his face that did not bode well for me. "Please, Dad, no! Youâ€| you don't know what you're up against, it's like nothing you've ever seen!" He didn't listen, instead heading slowly for the gate. "Dad, I promise you, you can't win this one!" I yelled, running to catch up to him. "For once in your life, can you please just listen to me?!"

Those last words were spoken in a shrill shriek that pierced the air. My voice broke from anger and fear. But Stoick still didn't listen, instead pushing me aside like I was nothing.

"You've thrown your lot in with them," he said quietly, not even looking at me. "You're not a Viking. You're not my son."

Then he left without another word. Everyone else in the arena followed him. And they took the still-chained Toothless with them.

I knew where they were all going. And I knew that none of them would survive.

I guess I am "Hiccup the Useless" after all, I thought miserably.

-.--.-.-.

(Siren's POV)

I took my ear away from the cage door, shocked at what I had just heard. "Did you hear that?" I whispered to no one in particular. "Yep," replied Hookfang, similarly awed. "That human was defending dragons, wasn't he?"

Horrorcow breathed from her cage, "Did you hear how passionately he did it?" Barf piped up, "He really caresâ€|" and her brother Belch continued for her, "â€| a lot about us and our predicament."

Even Stormfly was impressed with the boy. "Batwings, you saw the human, right?" she asked, irritably. I now realized that the vain Nadder used that tone of voice quite a lot.

"Yes," I said in reply to her question. "He's the same one who saved the Night Fury from death and who caused me to become imprisoned. Butâ€| he was genuinely friendly to me. I think that he might be able to help us destroy the Red Death."

Meatlug sounded worried, as she did most of the time. "How?" she asked timidly. "I don't know," I replied honestly. "That's just the feeling I get. A Siren's intuition is never wrong."

Stormfly grunted. "I suppose the boy's right," she said reluctantly. "Only thing is, how do we help?"

I cocked my ear to the door again, as I heard new voices. "Let's listen, and maybe we'll find out."

-.-.-.-..

(Hiccup's POV)

I don't know what drew them here, but soon after all the adults had left for what seemed like a suicide mission, the other trainees had gathered with me in the arena.

"It's a mess," said Fishlegs uncertainly. "You must feel horrible," said Snotlout with a laugh. Astrid glared at him, then said, "You've lost everythingâ€| your father, your tribeâ€| your best friendâ€|"

I gave them all a look of icy death. "Thank you for summing that up," I said to quiet them. "Why couldn't I have killed that dragon when I found him in the woods?" I asked myself just then, mournfully.

"Yeah, the rest of us would have done it," said Tuff bluntly. Then his sister spoke, asking, "So why didn't you?"

I didn't answer. I just didn't know how. Then Ruff repeated, "Why didn't you?" Sighing, I answered her. "I don't know. Iâ€| I couldn't."

Snaketail looked at me balefully. "That's not an answer," she pressed. I became angry again, demanding, "Why is this so important to you all, all of a sudden?" It was Snotlout who answered with amazing loyalty, "Because we want to remember what you say right now."

For some reason, hearing that from Snotlout annoyed me. "Oh for the love ofâ€| I was a coward! I was weak! I wouldn't kill a dragon!" My voice became furious as my temper grew.

But then Astrid joined in again. "You said 'wouldn't' that time," she said smugly. I snarled, being attacked from all sides, "Whatever! I wouldn't! Three hundred years and I'm the first Viking who wouldn't kill a dragon."

There was a shocked silence for a few seconds. Then Tuffnut spoke up. "I wouldn't," he said idly, and everyone looked at him simultaneously in complete shock.

He shrugged as if it were the most normal thing in the world. "Hey, it's not like I was ever going to pass Dragon Training anyway. And I think dragons are too cool to kill." Ruffnut said honestly, "I never thought I'd say this, but I agree with Tuffnut. And you too, Hiccup."

Snaketail nodded. "I come from a place where dragons don't exist, so it's easy for me to not want to kill them," she explained. Fishlegs piped up gingerly, "Besides, I think life would be better if we lived in peace with them."

Even Snotlout puffed out his chest pompously and said, "If I were the chief, I'd order all the dragons here to Berk so we could say to the other tribes, 'Hey, Chief Snotlout tamed all the dragons!'"

All of us probably knew that Snotlout wasn't being serious, but my

Thor, I was both grateful and completely awed that my friends all felt the same way I did about the war. They were all tired of it and wanted it to end.

I felt so touched, that for some reason, I suddenly realized why I didn't kill Toothless in the woods that day. "I wouldn't kill him because he looked as frightened as I was," I told them, and they all listened, enraptured. "I looked at him, I looked deep into those eyes" and I saw myself in them."

Fishlegs' eyes looked like they'd pop right out of his sockets. "I'll bet he's really frightened now," he said, sounding a little frightened himself. "What are you going to do about it?" asked Snaketail softly.

I considered. "Eh, probably something stupid," I replied casually. Astrid smiled at me. "Good, but you've already done that," she said in an almost patronizing tone.

Then, an idea sprang to life in my head. It had the longest odds of succeeding, but if we could pull it off" "Then something crazy," I murmured, already dashing for the gate, gesturing for the others to stay put and wait. "That's more like it," I heard Astrid say approvingly.

But Snotlout and Tuffnut got ahead of me and stopped me. "I just wanted to say that I love the sound of this plan," Snotlout needlessly encouraged me, slapping me on the back. As I stumbled, Tuffnut said dramatically, "You were wise to seek help from the world's most deadly weapon. "Uh, that's me."

I just shook my head and grinned before rushing off to the village to get some rope. But I didn't even get to the bridge leading back to the village, because Ruffnut ambushed me.

"You're crazy," she said harshly, making me cringe a little bit. Then with a glance to make sure no one was watching, she leaned in and said seductively, "I like that."

I leaned back before she could get close enough to kiss me " which I'm sure she was about to do " and said, "Um, right. Gotta go now." I dashed off before she could say another word, although I caught sight of her smirking smugly at me from the corner of my eye.

In less than five minutes, I was back with the others in the arena with some rope and prototype saddles that I had made in my spare time. I had been planning to test them out with Toothless, but now that wasn't possible.

Fishlegs saw this and guessed what I was about to do. "If you're planning on getting eaten," he said skeptically, "I'd definitely go with the Gronckle."

It was then that I realized that no matter how much faith my friends had in me, they were still unconvinced as to how I was able to tame the dragons. I decided that they needed proof. I glanced once at Fishlegs as I made my way over to the Siren's cage and unlocked it.

Everyone looked thunderstruck as the lock clicked loudly. Even Astrid

looked a bit fearful.

The door creaked open slightly, and I could see the fingers of a clawed hand clutching it. The Siren peeked out nervously, his blue eyes betraying the smallest bit of fear.

The others, I saw, were experiencing mixed fear and amazement. I noticed that the Siren was quite peaceful-looking in his human form, despite the wings and claws. He was kind of handsome as well. Nervously, the Siren stepped out from behind the door, running his claws through his dirty-blond hair.

I held out my hand in a calming gesture, just like what I had done earlier. This time, he held out his own hand and gently shook mine, smiling all the while. "Hello," he whispered.

"Nice to meet you," I greeted him. "My name's Hiccup. And these are my friends â€" Snoutlout, Snaketail, Astrid, Tuffnut, Ruffnut, and Fishlegs." The Siren's expression darkened when I gestured to them in turn. He didn't greet them.

Of course, I was slightly confused as to why this was. "I don't trust them," the Siren murmured as if reading my mind. "We Sirens only talk to someone if forced to, or if we trust them completely."

In a way, I was a little flattered. I was glad the Siren trusted me, because then I'd be able to enlist his help that much more easily. "Do you have a name?" I asked, and as soon as I did, I dismissed it as a ridiculous question.

But the Siren was nodding and replying to my question. "Yes. I am Batwings." His voice never rose to a louder volume.

I took a breath and pressed on. "Batwings," I began, "do you think you could help my friends and I? My father and my best friend are even now heading for Hel's Gate." I caught the look of alarm on Batwings' face.

"You're going to need more than just my help," he said simply, when he had regained his composure. I took a look at my friends behind me â€" they were all curiously observing my seemingly one-sided conversation with the dragon.

I turned back to Batwings and grinned confidently at him. "I have a plan for that," I said to him, before making my way toward the Monstrous Nightmare's cage.

I unlocked it and opened the door myself, already reaching out with my hand. The Nightmare emerged with a growl, slowly advancing on me, silently telling me not to make a move. I backed up as it did so, still with my hand held in front of me, just before its snout.

The other trainees, although I couldn't see them, were looking at me and the Nightmare with complete awe on their faces. I could hear Snotlout fidgeting behind me, sounding as if he was going to wet himself.

Well, he'd just have to face his fear, I told myself. Batwings came to my side and whispered in the Nightmare's ear. The dragon looked at him, and then back at me, this time with more respect in its eyes. It

growled softly at Batwings, who nodded and said to me, "Hookfang says that he wants to help."

I smiled uncontrollably. With this beast, and hopefully the others, on our side, we might just be able to defeat the giant dragon god and save Stoick and Toothless. Never averting my gaze from Hookfang's, I groped behind me and found Snotlout's hand after a second or two.

"Wait!" he said, voice rising to a shout. "Wait, what are you" "I cut him off, violently shushing him. "It's OK," I told him, and for reasons of his own, allowed me to guide his hand to the Nightmare's snout.

Hookfang curiously looked at him and grunted in a friendly way. Snotlout seemed to understand that the dragon wasn't going to kill him, and laughed delightedly.

Trusting that he'd be able to remain with Hookfang, I let go of his arm and made my way to where I'd dumped the rope and saddles. "Wh-where are you going?!" Snotlout yelled after me, suddenly nervous again.

"You're going to need something to hold on," I told him, holding up a length of rope and the biggest saddle of the bunch.

Everyone simultaneously turned to the sound of more doors opening. Batwings was standing there, smiling, and there beside him were the other dragons. The Nadder, Zippleback, Gronckle, and Grounder were all eyeing us curiously, as if wondering which teenager to pair up with.

Then commenced the most amazing hour of my life. I walked around the arena, observing my friends interact with the dragons, trying to get a feel for each of them. Frequently, I had to give them tips and instructions on how to interact with the dragons. But I had to admit, this was a dream come true for me.

I went over to Fishlegs, who was still acting as if the Gronckle would bite his hand off the second it had the opportunity. "Batwings, who's this beautiful dragon?" I asked him. He had previously told me it helped to refer to a dragon with flattering terms, especially the Nadder. Not only did it help their self-esteem, but it showed them that you thought of them highly and respectfully.

"The Gronckle's name is Meatlug," Batwings said in my ear. I repeated his whispered advice to Fishlegs, and he said to the Gronckle, "Nice Meatlug! what wonderful, rock-crushing jaws you have!" He said the words nervously, but calling the dragon by name certainly helped. Meatlug gave him a sloppy lick across the face, and Fishlegs began to warm up to her.

I passed Snotlout, who had made fast friends with Hookfang. Then I contented myself with observing Snaketail and the Grapple Grounder, whose name was Horrorcow. She was tickling her under the chin while she wagged her whip-like tail and squealed delightedly. Snaketail caught me watching and winked.

Then there were the twins. They were fighting over which head of the Zippleback they wanted to ride on. Shaking my head and going over to

them, I said exasperatedly, "Here, this might help." I separated them from the dragon, and each other, and told them, "Let's let the dragon pick which riders it wants."

I was speaking calmly in order to help them settle down. Ruff immediately settled down and went with my suggestion, not missing the opportunity to do some flirting. I shuddered and looked to Tuff, who reluctantly agreed.

A moment passed as the Zipplebacks' heads looked the twins over in turn, taking their time. Ruff was just about to complain when the right head, Barf, picked her up and flung her onto her neck. Then Belch, Barf's brother, did the same to Tuff. Both heads, and both twins, looked happy.

Finally, despite her attempted courage, Astrid was having a lot of trouble bonding with the Nadder. I motioned Batwings over, who was wordlessly guiding Fishlegs and Meatlug, and tried to help her as best as I can.

"I can't find the right spot under her chin to scratch," Astrid complained bitterly. "I'm hopeless with dragons. I don't think I can do this." She looked close to tears as she said this.

For the life of me, I was speechless. I never thought of Astrid as hopeless, as she was pretty much good with anything. But I thought I knew why she was having trouble with the dragons — she acted unafraid, but inside, she was quaking with fear. She had seen the worst dragons could do in battle, and was terrified of it. That was part of the reason she had trained so hard to fight them, I realized right then.

"Here, let me help!" I suggested, and guided her hands to the right spot. With Batwings' help, I successfully helped Astrid. But as soon as I turned to leave, she needed help with something else.

I was forever patient with her, and with my help, Astrid and Stormfly — which Batwings had said the Nadder's name was — quickly became the best of friends. I caught myself blushing when I witnessed Astrid laughing her heart out when Stormfly licked her.

"Thanks, Hiccup," she said sincerely. I waved her thanks off, saying I didn't need it. But of course, she ignored that and hugged me around the neck, just like last night in the gorge. For a moment, a flutter arose in my chest — a shadow of the infatuation I used to get around her. _Why? _I asked myself. _I thought these feelings had vanished entirely._ I found an excuse to leave, and left her alone with her new dragon.

Soon, though, I knew we would have to leave. My dad and Toothless, not to mention the entire Viking army, were in mortal danger. Batwings seemed to have read my mind, as he became a little edgy and hurried everyone along. The others quickly figured out that playtime was rapidly nearing its close, and seemed to clam up with nervousness. Even Snotlout was quiet.

"OK, everyone, this is it," I called out from my position on Stormfly's back. We were all on our dragons, and Stormfly was at the head of them all. Astrid sat behind me with her arms firmly wrapped around my waist.

"We've all gotten to know our dragons," I continued strongly. "Some of us have even formed a bond with them, to which I offer my congratulations. But our true test is still ahead, and it will test just how strong your bonds with your dragons are. We must save our families from the dragon god, which Batwings informs me is called the Red Death. We must get there by flying on the backs of our dragons, which you have no practice doing. But you must learn, for our lives and the lives of our loved ones depend on it."

Everyone had grown still and silent during my impressive speech. But I wasn't done yet. "You are all good Vikings, but inside, I see more. I see in front of me five great, pure-hearted Vikings, that wish for peace more than war." I realized that Astrid knew I hadn't meant to leave her out. "Show me your strength by flying and fighting alongside me! Show me the combined power of you and your dragons as we defeat the Red Death!"

The cheer that followed wasn't as loud or enthusiastic as the cheer I had gotten earlier that day, but it was much more than I could have asked for. My heart swelled with pride â€" although a small part of that came from the fact that Astrid had just squeezed my waist a little tighter and rested her head on my shoulder.

With that, the dragons galloped single file out of the arena and took to the skies. My friends adjusted to their new environment much more quickly than I could have imagined. I looked back at them with satisfaction, then faced the front and steered Stormfly toward our destiny.

-.-.-.-.-.

****Hel's Gate (Stoick's POV)****

The boat ran aground, and the Night Fury struggled ever harder against its bond. But I didn't pay any attention to it â€" I was staring with both wonder and grim satisfaction at my surroundings.

"We're here," I murmured as I saw the tip of a dragon's tail slide into a cavern. I jumped out of the boat and landed on the pebbly beach. Instantly, the warbling of a thousand dragons that had been emanating from all over stopped.

If I found that suspicious, I ignored the feeling. A sense of triumph came over me. Finally, after 300 years of searching for this place, we had found it. After 300 years of warring with the dragons, all of that was about to end.

I could already taste our inevitable victory. After all, it was only a few hundred dragons against my expert men and women. What could possibly go wrong?

-.-.-.-.-.

****And we end the chapter with that classic irony.****

****Reviews are good, and please wait patiently for the next chapter â€" the final fight against the Red Death!****

12. Here Comes the Red Death!

****Probably the most awesome battle scene in any movie is finally here in word format.****

****I listened to the Red Death's theme music nonstop while writing this. Now that music is a whole new type of epic.****

****Also, I'm sorry this fanfic has been coming along kind of slow. I've been doing a lot of role-playing with my friends lately, and even though I like writing, my friends always come first.****

-.--.-.-.

The first hour or so went by slowly. Although I knew that we'd win easily, I also knew that it didn't pay to go into a battle unprepared, especially when we were given the luxury of setting up camp literally right next to the battlefield.

We had taken out every last bit of supplies that we had brought with us. Not only had we brought plenty of weapons, but we had brought the materials to make several catapults. Now, my warriors were taking the extra logs and creating sharp spears out of them to use as necessary.

I and a group of my best men were crouched over a drawing I had made on the rocky beach. It was a representation of the battlefield, indicating battle positions and war strategies. When I had finished speaking, and all of my warriors knew what to do, I told them, "When we crack this mountain open, all Hel is going to break loose."

Gobber "€" either he was trying to lighten the mood or he was actually being serious "€" said to Spitelout, "In my undies. Good thing I brought extras." Spitelout's only response was a roll of his eyes and a snort.

"No matter how this ends," I announced, getting up again, "it ends today!"

I held up a hand for everyone behind me to see, and then made a fist "€" a signal. Each of the catapults that we had set up were released, and they launched a barrage of boulders at one point on the mountain. As I suspected, the inside was hollow, and thus the wall crumbled at the blows.

A yawning, dark chasm was opened up in the mountain. I climbed up to the edge of the huge pit and held my hammer at arm's length, at the ready. I held it up and then signaled again. This time, a rope-wrapped rock was set aflame and launched from a catapult.

The fireball flew straight into the darkness, giving it a dim illumination. I felt a shiver of excitement when the walls were revealed to be crawling with dragons of all shapes and sizes.

When the fireball had vanished completely, I gave my loudest battle cry and ran to meet the dragon army, my loyal warriors following right behind me.

-.--.-.-.

(Red Death's POV)

I was in deep sleep, dreaming a pleasant dream of swooping down from the clouds and picking off Viking ships from the raging surf. There was an endless number of them, and I took delight in flinging the ships into the air and eating the tasty morsels they carried.

I don't know what it was that woke me up â€" a change in the light, perhaps. Groggily, I opened my eyes and viewed the relaxing, familiar sights of my volcano home.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw a bright, bright light appear. Instinctively, I looked up at it â€" and a fireball slammed into my head.

Although small in comparison to my own size, the impact still hurt terribly. I gave a roar of pain and anger that shook the mountain and sent all of the smaller dragons scattering in all directions.

Rage growing at the fools that would dare attack me â€" and that I already knew were outside waiting for me â€" I began the climb out of my pit.

-.--.-.-.

Sky (Hiccup's POV)

We had been flying for about ten minutes, and the fog had just started to roll in. "Alright everyone, don't panic!" I reassured them. "Your dragons will know where to go, even if you won't! Just trust them!"

Even though my faith in the dragons was complete and unquestioning, I still experienced a shiver of nervousness as I felt Stormfly tense up and quiver at the nearness of the Red Death. As if to confirm this, we heard an echoing roar come from somewhere in the distance.

Astrid, although trying to be brave, couldn't help shivering and shuffling closer to me. "What was that?" asked Tuffnut, eyes wide. "I don't think I want to know," gulped Fishlegs in response. Snaketail hesitantly replied, "Well, I guess we're going to find out."

By now, the mist had completely enveloped us, and we were all relying on our dragon mounts to find their way to the nest. They were all warbling nervously as they twisted and turned expertly through the maze of rock spires.

The roar came again, followed by a flare of light that easily shone through the mist. I tensed up, as did the others. We all knew that the final battle was approaching fast.

I gripped the reins more tightly, and goaded Stormfly to fly faster.

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****Dragon Nest (Stoick's POV)****

"Beard of Thor, what is that?" asked Gobber, yelling over the noise. I jolted myself out of my shock and stared up at the horrible monster that had smashed its way up through the volcano. As massive boulders rained down amongst us, the beast roared and took the last few steps onto the beach.

"Odin help us," I murmured to myself. For seeing a monstrosity like this drained every last flicker of hope from me. _There's no way we can win this,_ I realized, _but we have to at least try._

"Catapults!" I yelled out, and my men sprang into action. The catapults unleashed a fresh barrage of rocks at the monster, but to my horror, they all bounced right off of its thick hide. One stray boulder glanced lightly off of its head, and it roared in response, biting down upon the offending catapult and crushing it to splinters.

Upon seeing our best weapon effortlessly crushed between the beast's jaws, most of the Vikings lost their bravado. "To the ships!" someone yelled, and I protested, "No, no!" We couldn't flee, not when we had taken the liberty of bringing the war to the dragons' turf. It went against my pride and my success as a chief to take such a cowardly course of action.

But my opinion didn't matter either way. The dragon roared and opened its maw wide, and then shot out an intense stream of fire at the ships floating near the shore. Even from far below the creature's head, I could feel the unbearable heat. Wherever the fire struck a ship, it exploded violently in a conflagration of flame. The men still on the ship were roasted alive even as they frantically dove into the water.

That wasn't what struck me, though. It was the fact that we now had absolutely no means of escape from the island.

"Smart, that one," Gobber commented, appearing by my side as if by magic. "I was a fool," I muttered, then stopped for a second. _Why had I said that?_ I decided that it was my decision to come here that made me a fool.

"Lead the men to the far side of the island!" I ordered Spitelout, who nodded and repeated my orders to the scattered Vikings. "I'll stay with you," Gobber told me, "just in case you're thinkin' of doin' somethin' crazy."

I turned and locked eyes with him. "I can buy them a few minutes if I give that thing someone to hunt!" I said fiercely. But Gobber took my hand and clasped it in his own. "Then I can double that time," he said loyally, and for the first time in a while, I smiled.

"Here!" I called up to the monstrosity that was amusing itself by continuously ravaging the ships. "Oh no, here!" Gobber called, limping up to it from a slightly different direction.

I tore one of the sharpened logs out of the ground and hurled it like a javelin with all of my might, and it succeeded in hitting the giant dragon in the face. The monster stopped its assault and glared down

at us.

"Fight me!" yelled Gobber, raising his hammer. "No, me!" I called from the other side of its head. The dragon rose up slightly on its hind legs and snarled, green gas forming at the back of its throat as it prepared to finish us with one awesome blast of fire.

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(Hiccup's POV)

The fog suddenly thinned completely, giving us a perfect view of the dragon's nest "and more importantly, a view of the Red Death terrorizing the Viking army. "What the Hel is that thing?" Snaketail screamed at me from her position in our flight formation. "That," Astrid responded, "is what we're after." I added unnecessarily, "The Red Death."

I saw it moving to attack Stoick and Gobber, and I knew we had to act soon. "We're going in!" I cried, and steered Stormfly down toward the Red Death, with the others following. "Fishlegs, stop it from hurting them!"

Fishlegs broke formation and patted Meatlug's head as he dove toward the monster's head, prompting her to spit a fireball. The ball of flame impacted solidly against the Red Death's head and exploded, effectively stopping its attack on Gobber and my dad.

"Ruff and Tuff, watch your backs!" I yelled as we flew past the giant's head, now perfectly visible to the Vikings, now standing there watching us, muttering to themselves in disbelief.

"Move it, Batwings!" I said to the Siren, who was lagging somewhat and had narrowly avoided the Red Death's jaws. From the corner of my eye, I could see Gobber and Stoick observing us with "I couldn't believe it " wonder.

"Look at us!" Snotlout called to the assembled Vikings below. "We're on dragons, all of us!" I shook my head as our formation circled around the Red Death, who was now flinging ships around and chomping at whomever drew its attention. "Fishlegs, break it down for us," I told Fishlegs, who knew dragons better than any of us " besides Batwings, of course.

"OK," he began, "heavily armored skull and tail made for bashing and crushing. Steer clear of both! Small eyes and large nostrils " relies on hearing and smell." I nodded to him and began giving orders. "Alright, we'll split up. Lout, Legs, keep it nice and distracted. Make some noise and keep it confused. Tail, Tuff, Ruff, find out if it has a shot limit. Make it _mad_."

Ruff drew herself up proudly. "That's my specialty," she bragged, and of course Tuffnut had to contradict her. "Since when? Everyone knows that _I'm_ more irritating. See?" He pulled a rude face and flipped Belch's head upside down.

"Just do as I told you!" I said, exasperated. "I'll be back as soon as I can!" I steered Stormfly away and over the flaming ships bobbing freely in the water.

"What about me?" asked Batwings, still flying next to us. I had to admit, it was really weird having such a human-like creature flying effortlessly next to us. "You canâ€¦" I began, looking around for something for Batwings to do.

That's when I saw a pile of boulders piled on the ground well away from the Red Death. I could see flashes of orange light occasionally burst from it. "Go find out what's going on with those rocks!" I told him, and he nodded and flew off.

I could hear and see everything that was going on with the Red Death as I searched. I could see Barf and Belch flying circles around the dragon's head while the twins shouted, "Troll! Butt-elf! Bride of Grendel!" The Red Death probably didn't understand the words, but it did the meaning. It shot a short burst of fire their way, and when they dodged, it shot another. Luckily, they just barely dodged that one as well.

Meanwhile, I continued to search, even as Snotlout and Fishlegs hovered on their dragons, taking up positions on either side of the Red Death's head. "Um, this thing doesn't have a blind spot!" Fishlegs shouted for whatever reason.

I kind of lost myself in watching them after that. They began bashing their shields with their weapons to confuse it, and at first, it looked like it was working. But unfortunately, Hookfang and Meatlug were affected as well. Meatlug spun crazily toward the ground, and Hookfang careened into the Red Death's head, accidentally trapping Snotlout atop its forehead.

"There!" I exclaimed, pointing to a ship that floated away from the others. Toothless was trapped in a metal harness, with his mouth bound so he couldn't breathe fire, and with flames closing in around him. I leapt off of Stormfly's back and landed smoothly on the deck. "Go help the others!" I called to Astrid, and she took the rope in her hands and steered the Nadder into battle.

I was left alone to save Toothless. If I could save him.

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(Batwings' POV)

I carved a neat turn through the air to the boulders that Hiccup had indicated. Indeed, as I came closer, I could see random flashes of orange light emanate from the cracks. I drew even closer, and could now pick up on strange noises coming from the middle of the pile.

I landed on top of one boulder. Whatever was imprisoned within stopped what it was doing as it detected the noise of my talons scratching on the rock. "Help me," came the quiet voice. "I'm trapped, and scared that the Red Death will find me here."

I instantly dismissed the notion that the voice was lying and trying to trick me. If there was one thing we Sirens prided ourselves on, it was our intuitions. When we felt these things, we were always right. And I felt that the dragon â€" yes, I knew it was a dragon â€" trapped inside really did need help.

"Careful," I cautioned it. "I'm going to try and move this boulder." The dragon stilled, apparently staying out of the way in case it was crushed by the boulder as I moved it. I straddled another boulder, dug my taloned hands into a crack in the pile, and pulled upward on the rock, trying to shift it.

It was no use â€" I wasn't strong enough in my humanoid form. But that problem was easily solved. I shapeshifted, coiled around as much of the rock as I could, and pulled. The rock moved slightly, and with one more tug, it came free. Hastily, I slithered out of the way before it could roll on top of me.

I peeked inside the "cavern" and was stunned by what I saw. Although it was dark, I could make out the form of a young Whispering Death, sightless eyes wide, with her tail trapped under another rock.

"Don't worry," I hissed soothingly. "I'm going to get you out of here." The Whispering Death nodded, the gesture conveying her state of mind perfectly â€" understanding with a hint of panic.

Slithering out of the cavern, I located the boulder trapping the poor dragon and realized that it was the largest of the bunch. Not only would I have a lot of trouble shifting it, but if I succeeded, it would bring the entire pile down on top of the Whispering Death.

"As soon as you feel your tail come free," I warned her, "you're going to have to fly as fast as you can out of there. Understand?" Her soft voice hissed back, "Yes! Now please, set me free!"

My heart gave a pang of pity at the Whispering Death's plight, then I shook my head and coiled around the boulder and pulled with every last ounce of my strength.

This time, it only took one try for the boulder to come free. As I predicted, the pile of rocks came crashing down upon the imprisoned dragon, but as quick as a squirrel, she was safely out.

"Thank you!" she hissed, hovering over me. Trapped underneath the rock I had moved, I said back, "Don't mention it. Now, could you please return the favor?"

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(Astrid's POV)

This time, I was in control, and it made me nervous. But Stormfly needed a rider to steer her into the battle, and from what Batwings had told Hiccup earlier, she trusted me. So I forced myself to push my nervousness out of my mind.

I dove to help Fishlegs, whose Gronckle had crashed on the beach and was now under threat of being squashed by the Red Death's enormous foot. But Snotlout, surprisingly, was the one to come to the rescue. Using Fishlegs' hammer, he was bashing the Red Death in each of its eyes, which I now could see there were six of them.

"What's the matter, buddy?" he taunted. "You got something in your eye?" The Red Death's response was a howl of pain, and its foot

missed Fishlegs by a couple of feet (pardon the pun).

"Yeah, you're the Viking!" I cheered him, one of those rare moments when he actually deserved it. He smiled back at me and kept up the bashing, but a single shake of the Red Death's head caused him to lose his balance and cling to one of its spines for dear life. The twins and Snaketail were nowhere to be seen.

Where's Hiccup? I asked myself, trying not to panic. _How hard can it be to release a dragon from a flaming warship?_

Hard. I just had to remind myself of that.

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(Hiccup's POV)

Well, I had successfully gotten the muzzle off of Toothless. That was the good news. The bad news was that there was still a whole lot of metal and wood holding him down.

I strained to get the clamp around his neck undone by using a broken spear for leverage, but my efforts were completely fruitless. We were running out of time, because the flames surrounding us were closing in around us.

And then, time unexpectedly ran out completely. The Red Death's tail smashed down the mast, which narrowly missed me, and then its foot came plunging down upon the boat, throwing Toothless and I into the sea.

Toothless sank to the bottom. It was only about fifteen feet deep, but I wasn't a strong swimmer. But I had to try.

I made it to the bottom with a strength born of desperation. That same strength urged me to tug as hard as I could on the clamp.

It was hopeless. That thought wound its way into my mind and drained my strength, as doubt tends to do. I was suddenly aware of how strained my lungs were for air, and I gave in. My body went limp, out of energy, and blackness began to move in.

Then, something yanked me upwards. I was dimly aware of Toothless' roar of anguish as he vanished into the darkness.

The same something that had grabbed me hauled me up onto the beach and dumped me there. I spluttered and coughed, lungs aching for the taste of fresh air. I sat up and saw a large shape dive back into the water. "Dad?" I asked myself, scarcely able to believe it.

Several long seconds passed before there was any more activity. And I couldn't believe what I saw next any more than what I just saw. With an immense spray of water, Toothless flew from the water, carrying my dad in his talons. Unceremoniously dumping him on the shore, he landed lightly on a flat rock and growled at me with determination on his face.

I knew what he meant, and what he wanted to do. He wanted to free his fellow dragons from the tyranny of the Red Death, once and for all. I wanted to save my people. And somehow, I knew he wanted that as well,

just as I also wanted the other dragons to be free.

"You got it, bud," I murmured, and ran to his side. I hugged him around the neck, and after a moment, Toothless reached back to nuzzle me.

I expertly hoisted myself up onto his back and clicked the stirrup into position. But before we could jump into the sky, I felt a meaty hand grab my own. Despite the obvious muscle behind it, its touch was deliberately gentle.

It was my father. And from the sadness in his eyes, I knew that he had finally realized the truth.

"I'm sorryâ€¦ for everything," he apologized. "Yeah, me too," I murmured back, referring to my entire deception that had led to this mess. Stoick continued, "I finally realized that your protest back in the arena wasn't just to save the lives of the dragons. Now I know upon facing that giant beast that you meant to save my life as well. You have the heart of a true Viking, and I am proud to call you my son."

I had never realized that upon his last scolding words to me, my heart had broken. But now, I felt it reform, and swell in my chest. "Thanks, Dad," I said, and then shot up into the sky.

There was a battle to be won, and a really nasty monster to slay.

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(Batwings' POV)

The Whispering Death had allowed me to ride just behind her head for the time being. I had twisted my wing while trying to break free from the boulder, so now I straddled her back in my humanoid form. The dragon, whose name was Nightshade, had carried me into battle, with me gripping her head spines frantically. Although I had done plenty of flying in my life, it was my first time riding another dragon.

But soon, as I grew used to the feeling, I began to enjoy it. I felt free and in control. Even more so, I felt like I was truly bonding with Nightshade. _Is this what those young Vikings are feeling as they ride their trusted companions?_

As Nightshade flew into the battle, I unconsciously tugged on her left horn to avoid a stray swipe from the Red Death's tail. For reasons of her own, she went with it and turned to the left. "Nice save," she commented over her shoulder. "Don't mention it," I said with a smile.

Now Nightshade and I joined Astrid and the twins aboard Stormfly and Barf and Belch. I heard the cheers of the Vikings below, and I feltâ€¦ something. I felt like I belonged. I glanced over at Astrid, and found her smiling broadly at me.

These Vikingsâ€¦ are now my battle brothers and sisters. I know I can trust them. A triumphant screech rang from my mouth as I urged Nightshade to increase her speed, and my morale went up dramatically

when I heard an answering screech from the distance. A single thought pounded in my head, filling me with confidence and determination.

He's airborne! The Night Fury prince is airborne once more!

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I decided to cut the battle off at this crucial point. It doesn't help with suspense because we all know how the story ends, but it's still nice and dramatic.

And what does Batwings mean by "Night Fury prince"? You'll find out in the next chapter!

Please review and stay tuned!

13. Hiccup's Sacrifice

You all know the rest, but here it is anyway.

And this is by no means the end for Hiccup and the gang â€" there's a whole TV series I have to go through still, and besides, I don't want to stop writing about Batwings and Snaketail.

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(Astrid's POV)

I heard the screech just before seeing a pitch-black shape streak into the sky. Joy filled my heart. "He's up!" I screamed to the others, smiling uncontrollably. From their positions on their dragons, and in Snotlout's case, atop the Red Death, everyone cheered enthusiastically.

"Get Snotlout out of there!" I instructed Ruff and Tuff, and they jumped to the task. "I'm on it!" confirmed Ruffnut, and her brother contradicted, "No way, I'm on it first!" They started one of their infamous arguments as their Zippleback flapped determinedly ahead to save Snotlout.

As for Snotlout himself, he saw that he'd have to make a desperate gamble to board Barf and Belch, which was flying at a height much too inconvenient for the twins to grab him at. And of course, they didn't notice, so intense was their fight. Snotlout waited until the last second, and then took a running leap from the Red Death's horn right onto the Zippleback's back.

"Wow, I can't believe that worked!" I heard him say in wonder. But the Red Death's attention was focused on them, and if I didn't do something, they'd be lunch pretty quickly.

I coaxed Stormfly to zip around its great head, blowing white-hot fire and successfully distracting it long enough for Snotlout, Ruff, and Tuff to get out of its range. Doing a brief check to make sure that Batwings, Snaketail, and Fishlegs were all OK, I steered Stormfly up and away from the Red Death.

But wait â€" we weren't moving forward at all. I could hear a quiet sucking sound, which grew louder and louder as the wind grew stronger and stronger. I looked back fearfully, and saw a sight that would live in my nightmares for the rest of my life. The Red Death was forcefully inhaling with all its might, the sheer strength of its lungs rapidly drawing Stormfly and I toward its wide-open jaws.

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(Hiccup's POV)

It was such a wonderful feeling to be back in the sky with Toothless. Having my foot in its familiar position on the stirrup relaxed me, as did the feel of Toothless' scales underneath my palms. For a moment, I almost forgot that there was a battle going on.

But the roar of the Red Death, and the sight of Astrid's current situation, sent my senses into overdrive. "Toothless, dive!" I called, and I folded the prosthetic fin. Instantly feeling the fin fold back, the Night Fury did the same with his other fin, going into a steep plunge, dead on course for the Red Death.

Dimly, I was aware of the others on their dragons circling around, wondering if and how they should help. _I don't need them this time,_ I realized with surprising calm. _I never would have believed it, butâ€| I can defeat this thing on my own._

"Fire!" I said, just loud enough for Toothless to hear me. With an awesome screech, he readied a pulse of blue fire as he plunged ever faster. I could see Vikings taking cover beneath me, but my attention wasn't focused on them. It was completely focused on saving Astrid and Stormfly.

Toothless' screech reached its peak, and he let loose the fireball. It slammed into the Red Death like a meteor, a blue shockwave radiating some distance from the impact site. The impact itself was so great, it staggered the Red Death. But my heart caught in my mouth as I saw Astrid flung from the back of Stormfly, with the Nadder flying off in shock.

Surprisingly, Toothless dove after her without my urging. But no matter how fast he flew, I knew instinctively that we wouldn't make it before she hit the ground.

There was a blur of motion, and a flash of bright red just in front of us. I looked over to the side and saw Snaketail atop Horrorcow, who wheeled in her flight to join us. "Did you get her?" I desperately called. Snaketail grinned, and Horrorcow gestured with her head to her claws. Dangling from one of them was Astrid.

She smiled up at me, and I couldn't help smiling in return. I clicked the stirrup, allowing Toothless and I to accompany Horrorcow and Snaketail as the two dragons flew flank-to-flank.

Horrorcow coiled her body up in one sinuous movement and dropped Astrid onto the rocks below. The dragon landed a moment later, and we instantly passed the now stationary Grapple Grounder. Snaketail waved, and Astrid cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled.

I caught her words almost perfectly â€" "Go, Hiccup! Go!" With one last smile, I turned back to face the front.

Destiny awaited.

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(Batwings' POV)

Nightshade, having no legs, wasn't the best at landing, but she managed to do so without breaking anything. I hopped off of her and ran to join the Viking teens, with Nightshade slithering after me. I winced as my injured wing gave a sharp sting of pain when I tried to fold it up.

Upon noticing me, several people nodded to acknowledge me. But Fishlegs let out a high-pitched squeal that was hurriedly muffled in his hands. He was looking at something over my shoulder, so I turned. I saw nothing but Nightshade, grinning with amusement.

"What?" I demanded. Now several of them gawked at me. It was only then that it came to me â€" that was the first time I had used my normal voice in their presence.

As quickly as I could, I explained. "We Sirens only speak to someone if they trust them. I fought alongside you, briefly, and my intuition tells me that I can trust you all somewhat. A Siren's intuition is never wrong, you see."

There were a few confused faces at that remark, but Astrid, at least, seemed to understand. Fishlegs raised a shaky hand to point at Nightshade. "Y-y-you d-do know th-that there's a Whispering D-Death b-b-behind you," he stammered, gulping several times as if to suppress his apparently growing fear.

"So?" I asked rhetorically. "Nightshade will not hurt you. I freed her from a mass of boulders that she was trapped underneath. Now, she and I work together as a team." Nightshade nodded and hissed gently. But Fishlegs didn't seem to get the message.

"Hiccup's going up to fight that thing," said Snotlout with awe in his voice, turning his head up to the sky. "He's absolutely insane." Tuffnut nodded understandably. "Yep, he is," he confirmed. "But we're Vikings, remember? Insane's what we do best."

Ruffnut was staring up at the sky, eyes trained on the Night Fury that was rapidly rising in flight. She didn't say anything, and perhaps she didn't have to. It was clear from the look in her eyes that she was positively infatuated with the Night Fury's rider.

"Do you think Hiccup and Toothless will be alright?" Astrid asked to no one in particular, worry present in her voice. "Oh, for sure," I replied, much to everyone's surprise. "I've seen first-hand how they fly. They'll be fine, and besides, it's in the Night Fury's blood. He's a prince, you know."

I guessed from the bewildered looks everyone gave me that they didn't know. So I began to explainâ€¦

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(Hiccup's POV)

"That thing has wings!" I said to myself, upon realizing that those immense folds of skin that hung like dark rags at the Red Death's sides were in fact wings. "Let's see if it can use them, okay Toothless?" The dragon gave an answering growl that clearly expressed his agreement.

Clicking the stirrup into one position, we suddenly pulled up. Toothless sensed what I was doing, flaring out his wings to help increase the drag. Then, as I adjusted the tail fin's position, he simultaneously folded his wings and shot downwards like a black arrow.

Our surroundings raced by in a blur as gravity increased our speed, with Toothless' screech becoming increasingly louder as the fire built up in his mouth. At last, with the form of the Red Death growing more distinct the closer we got to it, he released the fireball with one final roar, and this projectile was so powerful that it knocked the monster to the ground with a gargantuan explosion.

"You think that did it?" I asked Toothless, even though I knew that he wouldn't be able to form a response that I could understand. But nevertheless, I got my answer a second later, when the smoke and ash produced in the explosion was at its thickest.

A huge, dark shape extended from out of the obscuring smoke, blowing the clouds away. Another one just like it unfolded from the other side of the Red Death, which had righted itself and was just now roaring its anger at Toothless.

Even though I had been half-expecting this reaction, even I was stunned at the sheer enormity of the beast's wings. They seemed humorously fragile against the monster's sheer bulk, but they beat strongly again and again, lifting the Red Death clear off of the ground. Huge clouds of dust were churned up as it rose ever higher, and it slowly started forward after us.

The chase was on. Despite the Red Death's slowness, its size ensured that it kept pace with Toothless and I. We dove into the maze of rock spires that surrounded the volcanic island, hoping that we could confuse it with speed and agility, disappearing and reappearing from behind the rocky towers. But that plan was quickly rendered obsolete â€" the Red Death simply smashed right through each obstacle with apparently no harm done to itself.

"OK, new plan," I muttered. "Toothless, time to disappear!" I clicked the stirrup, and we suddenly wheeled up and back, straight past the Red Death's snapping jaws in a taunting maneuver.

Up toward the thick blanket of clouds above we flew, with the Red Death clumsily beating its wings as it followed closely. As we rapidly neared the thick storm clouds that had gathered during the fight, I began to have doubts that this plan would work.

But it was the only one I had, and it would work. It had to.

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(Batwings' POV)

"There's a legend among the dragons that a Night Fury and a human will end the war between Vikings and dragons," I began.

I was telling the story to an assembled crowd of Vikings. Originally, I had started telling it to the younger ones "my new friends" but soon, the other Vikings had gathered around, apparently fascinated by them and the seemingly benevolent dragons that guarded them closely.

I had assured both the dragons and the Vikings that their respective parties wouldn't cause harm to the other, then continued my story.

"You see, Night Furies and their close cousins, the Skrill, are so incredibly rare that they are considered amongst dragons to be royalty. Night Furies, being the more peaceful and diplomatic of the two, are often chosen to be the rulers in dragon clans. Skrills are naturally jealous of this, and the two are lifelong, mortal enemies that repeatedly clash over the right to rule over these clans.

"Well, three hundred years ago, the Red Death appeared in our clan and frightened us dragons into complete obedience. The rules it imposed were simple "provide food or become food. To prevent any potential rebellion, it banished our Night Fury king and his newly hatched son.

"But you see, the Red Death managed to capture and control the young prince. That's why he's been accompanying us on raids for food. But it wasn't until he met Hiccup, I assume, that he remembered his purpose. That's how the legend goes."

There was silence for a while, which was broken by Astrid, looking up at the clouds, from which huge flashes of blue light were emanating.

"So there's much more at stake than just our lives," she murmured so quietly that only I could hear. "There's the future and freedom of an entire dragon clan at risk."

Once again, I was the only one who noticed "there were tears glistening at the corners of Astrid's eyes. "Please, Hiccup. Please come down safe."

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(Hiccup's POV)

I admit, my plan was a long shot. I hadn't even entirely finished thinking it through. But I had no other choice. Who else could defeat the Red Death if I failed?

The dark, black clouds had totally enveloped me, destroying my ability to see. Toothless, however, seemed to know exactly where he was going, and that would be very helpful for what I was about to

do.

That was when the Red Death entered the cloudscape behind us, roaring and snapping its jaws. At the last second, I clicked the stirrup and we shot off in another direction. In less than a minute, we were completely hidden in the clouds.

The Red Death roared repeatedly, expressing its rage and frustration. I realized just then that I would be able to find it simply by listening for it. The next time it roared, I steered Toothless toward the sound.

I knew we were getting close when I began to see an area of clouds being churned up by our enemy's massive wings. I gave the signal to fire, and Toothless obliged.

The bolt of fire struck with a sound like a thunderclap. There was an explosion of blue light, and the Red Death bellowed with pain, aiming a stream of fire in the direction that we had come from. But it was much too late – we had already streaked past it and back into the murk.

It was just like the time we flew through the maze of rock all that time ago. I knew exactly where to steer Toothless just by following the sound of the dragon's voice. Doubling back around, we re-entered the "chamber" where the Red Death still hovered, and shot two more bolts of fire that struck each of its wings.

Again and again we hit our mark, dove back into the clouds, and fled, only to come back around and repeat the process. Time after time the Red Death futilely lashed out with its claws or tail, but always missed.

Several firebolts struck the Red Death's wings, causing it to roar and stagger in flight each time. Finally, it hissed angrily and spewed out a massive stream of flame. Around and around the Red Death twirled, filling the sky with fire. Sooner or later, we'd be caught if we weren't careful.

But as careful as we were, we were caught anyway. The fire almost missed us, but Toothless' prosthetic tail fin was lit aflame. "OK, time's up!" I yelled to Toothless. "Let's see if our plan works."

Toothless folded his wings and somersaulted in the other direction, back past the Red Death. Diving through a gaping hole in its wing, we plunged past its head, with its six eyes blazing with fury and pain. "Is that all you've got?" I taunted, steering Toothless in a circle around its head. The Night Fury roared, challenging the Red Death to follow.

We dove straight for the ground, with the prosthetic tail still clinging to Toothless' tail. However, the fire was eating away at it surprisingly fast. "Just hang in there, bud! Just a little bit longer!"

The Red Death followed us down, folding its own wings as it plummeted after us. Toothless and I swerved this way and that, trying to stop it from using its fire breath until the absolute last second.

Eventually, the time came when the tail became so damaged that it was impossible to turn as sharply. Toothless and I were forced onto a straight course, and from there, the Red Death would have an easy shot with its fire.

I looked back and saw the dragon's eyes narrow. It was about to fire, and it was now or never. "Hold, Toothless!" I told him quietly, and he began to ready a fire bolt.

The Red Death inhaled, gas hissing at the back of its throat. Now was the time!

"Toothless, NOW!" I shouted, and clicked the stirrup once. Toothless flipped over in flight until he was facing the Red Death's gaping maw. Just before it would have ignited its fire and blasted us with it, Toothless shot a ball of blue fire straight down its throat. The gas exploded and set the inside of its mouth on fire.

The clouds thinned. The island came into view far below. I urged Toothless on, trying to get him to fly faster. But with a damaged tail and a 100,000 pound monster right behind us, that was easier said than done.

The Red Death's mouth burst with flame as it tried again and again to smite us. But it was useless. The creature's gas reserves were burning out of control, cooking it from the inside. Its underbelly glowed dimly, slowly getting brighter as the flames inside grew more powerful.

All of a sudden, there were other dragons around me. Stormfly, Hookfang, and the rest were all there without their riders, scratching and clawing at the Red Death's eyes. I appreciated the fact that they wanted to help, but there was no way that they could. The Red Death was about to die, and if they didn't get out of the way, then they would as well.

"Get out!" I screamed, and Toothless screeched, presumably repeating my words. The dragons all turned to look at me, then scattered. I glanced back and gasped "we were almost at the ground. "Let's go, Toothless!"

I clicked the stirrup, and miraculously, there was just enough fin left to allow us to alter our position so that we now flew up past the falling behemoth.

The Red Death's eyes widened as it saw how close it was to a crushing impact. Desperately, it spread out its wings in order to slow its fall, but it was no use. Its sheer speed caused the wind to rip its wings apart.

A final roar tore its way from the Red Death's scorched throat, accompanied by the hiss and crackle of innumerable flames. It hit the ground with earthquake force, and the impact with the ground was the crucial blow. Flames erupted from inside of the massive dragon, causing it to literally explode.

I could feel the heat on the back of my neck as we raced up the length of the dragon's tail, desperately trying to outrace the fire. We were almost there " but wait. The Red Death's tail was heading

right towards us! Behind it, an eel-like dragon raced through the sky, sapphire eyes swimming with desperation.

Batwings would never make it in time. I tried adjusting the tail fin one last time, but the contraption, so burnt up that it was a mere skeleton of its former self, fell off. Toothless was completely powerless to avoid the falling tail.

"NO!" I screamed, and the tail smashed right into Toothless with incredible strength. I dimly heard something snap as I was hurled from his back, already falling into unconsciousness.

My blurry vision saw Toothless, no more than a black smudge against the fiery atmosphere, plunge after me. A serpent-like streak raced past him and opened its jaws. I felt a searing pain in my left leg, and then nothing. The last thing I saw was the serpent and the black smudge fading farther from view, and the painfully bright orange flames reaching out from the corners of my vision to engulf me.

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(Astrid's POV)

When I saw Hiccup and Toothless plunge down from out of the clouds after over a minute, I felt like cheering. They must have been victorious if they were returning so soon! But that thought almost instantly died when I saw the Red Death following.

But wait! There were flames emitting from the creature's mouth, and its pursuit became more and more like a controlled crash as it neared the ground. Its belly was glowing with an unhealthy orange-red light, and I could clearly see huge rips forming in its wings as it plunged.

It was safe to say that Hiccup had safely won the battle. I led the other Vikings in cheering the duo on.

Stormfly and the other dragons took flight just then, winging their way toward their old tyrant and harassing it as it fell. But I could hear Hiccup's shout of "Get out!" Gradually, I saw the reason behind him calling them off the attack â€" things were about to get very, very dangerous.

Nevertheless, Batwings, who was standing beside me at the time, suddenly shifted into his dragon form and took flight. I don't know how he found the strength to fly after injuring his wing, or why he took it upon himself to race toward what seemed to be an increasingly chaotic situation.

Then I saw Toothless' burnt-up tail fin, and thought in horror, _Oh no._

"Get down!" yelled Gobber, signaling for everyone to shield themselves. A second afterwards, the Red Death burst into flames, a huge shockwave sweeping dust and ash into our faces. But I couldn't look away as Hiccup and Toothless traveled along the length of the dying beast's tail. It seemed to take forever to me for the tail fin to fall and Hiccup to be knocked from Toothless' back.

"HICCUP!" I screeched in terror. Batwings dove down and seized his leg in his jaws, trying to save him. But Hiccup fell into the inferno anyway. _How, how could he have missed?_ I thought in shocked disbelief.

But Batwings hadn't missed. He hovered just above the raging fires in shock, a horrified expression on his face and a leg dangling from his mouth.

Hiccup's leg.

With agonizing slowness, the fires burnt out, leaving a thick cloud of ash in its place. Stoick marched into the cloud, calling out for Hiccup. I didn't even glance back at the others as I dashed after him.

Hiccup couldn't be dead. He couldn't. Not after everything he had been through, not after everything he had done to save us.

I tripped on a rock, and fell to the ground. It hurt more than it should have, and I felt tears spring to my eyes. It was then that I realized that it wasn't just the pain that was making me cry â€" it was the emotional agony of not knowing whether Hiccup was dead or alive.

Finally, I picked myself up off the ground and rushed once more at the scene conspiring before me. A crowd had gathered, but I pushed my way through them.

Only to find Stoick kneeling in front of an unconscious â€" or dead â€" Night Fury.

With this evidence in front of me, I had no choice but to believe what I saw. I could hear my friends gathering behind me, but I no longer cared. All I cared about was that Hiccup, the first true friend I had ever made on Berk, was gone forever.

I let the tears flow freely down my face, as I knew it didn't matter one way or another.

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(Batwings' POV)

I could scarcely believe it when the boy's leg came free in my mouth. All I could do was watch the boy fall and become engulfed by the blaze, followed by the Night Fury he, I had heard, called "Toothless".

I was shocked, horrified, and guilt-stricken. How could I have failed? That boy was the first human I had ever trusted. He had been our only hope against the reign of the Red Death, and although the tyrant was now no more, so was he.

I allowed myself to drift down into the cloud of ashes that had sprung to life where the fires had died. I touched down and coiled up around a boulder that I had landed on, only to find myself staring over the limp Toothless.

The Night Fury prince had been the hope of the future. Even while he

had been chased away and then enslaved by the Red Death, we dragons knew that as long as he existed, there was a way to destroy our cruel ruler.

I let the boy's leg drop from my mouth and thud against the ground below. The sound sickened me, both with literal sickness as well as the sickness of guilt.

Vikings gathered around the body of the Night Fury in mourning. The dragons that had originally fled the wrath of the Red Death were coming back, their keen senses already telling them what had transpired in their absence. They, too, mourned.

"I did thisâ€¦" I heard Stoick mutter. "If I had listened to himâ€¦ then this wouldn't have happenedâ€¦"

Despite my own grief, I did my best to console him. "But if you had listened to him," I said quietly, "then the dragons would still be slaves. Your son and this Night Fury sacrificed themselves for a new, better future." But although my words were true, they rang hollowly in the ashy air.

Suddenly, the Night Fury stirred. He lifted his head and opened those green eyes. The first thing he seemed to see was the Viking before him, and he tilted his head curiously.

Stoick seemed to grow even more saddened. "Oh, Hiccupâ€¦" he murmured, sinking even farther to the ground, palms placed against the rocky earth.

What happened next was indeed a sight to behold.

Toothless opened up his wings, which had been folded around his body, to reveal the lifeless form of a human boy.

"Hiccup!" Stoick rasped, taking the boy from Toothless' claws and examining him. I held my breath as he took off his helmet and pressed his ear to Hiccup's chest.

I saw Stoick's expression and body language change for the better. Even before the Viking chieftain spoke, my spirits lifted.

"He's alive! You brought him back alive!"

Dragons and Vikings alike cheered. "The Night Fury prince lives! He lives to fight again!" crowed the dragons, and several took to the skies and wheeled above Toothless in a celebratory flight. He seemed bewildered by all the attention, but not uncomfortable.

Putting his huge hand on Toothless' snout, Stoick said, "Thank youâ€¦ for saving my son."

As the Night Fury ducked his head modestly, Stoick stood up to his full height and placed a hand on my own. I was taken aback, and more than pleased. "And thank youâ€¦ for trying your best," said the chief earnestly.

Unconsciously, I shifted into my humanoid form and reached out a clawed hand. "Anything at all for your son," I said, and we shook.

Then Gobber limped up to Stoick's side and looked intently at Hiccup. "Well, at least ya saved most of 'im," he commented, gesturing to the boy's half a limb, bitten clean off at the calf.

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****Berk** **Village, Five Days Later (Hiccup's POV)****

A comfortably hard material against the back, a warm, soft substance lightly covering me, a splitting headache and no feeling in my left leg â€" those were the things I woke up to.

I heard an urgent warble, that sounded familiar to my ears. I sleepily opened my eyes to see none other than my good friend Toothless staring worriedly down upon me. "Hey, Toothless," I managed to say, reaching out with a shaky hand to pat his snout.

That wasn't enough, it seemed. Toothless began nudging and nuzzling me with a strange combination of affection and urgency. "Yeah, it's good to see you too," I said, my old sarcastic edge rapidly coming back.

"OWWW!" I yelped when Toothless accidentally stepped on my stomach. I instantly sat up and hugged my belly painfully, when I got my first clear look at my surroundings.

"Uh, I'm in my house," I said, thinking out loud. Then I saw Toothless sitting beside my bed, nervously fidgeting in place. "Um, you are in my house!" At this, he began to jump around the room excitedly. "Does Dad know you're in here?" I asked, and the question caused Toothless to stop leaping and perch himself in the rafters.

"Aw, Toothless, come onâ€|" I muttered exasperatedly. I threw off my bedsheets, about to climb out of bed, when something stopped me. I looked down at my left leg.

Everything looked perfectly normal â€" from the knee up. Beyond that, there was a spring-loaded metallic prosthetic in place.

I'm just like Gobber. And Toothless too, I thought in realization. But there was nothing I could do about it. I stood up tentatively, trying out the feeling of having only one and a half legs.

I took a step, and stumbled. Toothless started, but nodded his head, urging me on. I took a deep breath and tried again. This time, I tripped and began to fall. Toothless rushed forward instantly and caught me.

"Thanks, bud," I said gratefully. With his help, I managed to limp my way to the door. I opened it â€" and saw a snarling Monstrous Nightmare just outside the house, just like the night Snaketail and I had gotten acquainted.

"Toothless, you stay here," I cautioned, and opened the door again. But when I got a clearer view of what was out there, I saw that the Nightmare was in fact Hookfang, and Snotlout was riding him! In the village, in the middle of the day!

Had I gone insane? Had the Red Death's tail addled my brain?

Yes it had.

Before me was a scene so breathtaking that if it had been any more so, then my lungs would have deflated right then and there. Vikings and dragons were mingling peacefully, cooperating, and even flying together. A flock of Nadders perched together on top of a house, Gronckles and Scauldrons were eating from a huge central bonfire, and even Blundertails crawled freely through the village without opposition!

I pinched myself. It hurt. _If I'm not dreaming, am I in Valhalla? Is Odin waiting to welcome me here, somewhere?_

"I knew it," I said to myself in a hushed, awed voice. "I'm dead."

Suddenly, my dad was there, laughing cheerfully! "No, but you gave it your best shot," he reassured me jokingly. A little more seriously, he went on, "We spent the last five days preparing a little party for you when you woke up. Soâ€¦ what do you think?"

I couldn't say a word as I dazedly walked down the stairs and into the village. "Hey, it's Hiccup!" called Spitelout, a little Terrible Terror perched on his shoulder. Instantly, Vikings from all over the village were coming to greet me.

"I guess all Berk needed was a little more ofâ€¦ this," my dad said, indicating with his meaty hands to what he meant. "You just gestured to all of me," I said, this time not with an ounce of sarcasm. He nodded, a smile splitting his face in two.

And then all of my friends were there. Snotlout pumped my hand enthusiastically, Fishlegs lifted me into the air in a crushing bear hug, Snaketail threw her arms around my neck and told me how relieved she was to see me alive and well, and the twins took turns punching my arm merrily (and in Ruffnut's case, trying to kiss me).

Gobber walked up and said, "He meant most of ya," he said, gesturing to my new prosthetic. "Tha' bit's me own handiwork, with a bit of Hiccup flair thrown in. Ya think it'll do?"

I considered, holding up my leg so I could see it better. "I might make a couple of tweaks," I said honestly, making everyone chuckle.

Then came an unexpected punch on the shoulder, one that made my arm go numb. It was, of course, Astrid. "That's for scaring me," she said harshly.

I was indignant. "What, was it always going to be this way? Then I guess" â€" my protest was cut short as Astrid lunged forward and kissed me on the cheek.

Momentarily speechless, I managed to finish, "â€¦ I could get used to it." She gave me a real, genuine smile that lit up the world.

And there was still more to come. Batwings came up with a load of

equipment that he handed to Gobber, who in turn handed to me.
"Welcome home," he said as I examined the equipment.

I couldn't believe my eyes. This was becoming somewhat of a trend, to be honest, but this topped it all â€" it was a brand-new saddle, stirrup, and tail fin for Toothless.

"Night Fury!" someone suddenly called, before Toothless came bounding out of the crowd, knocking everyone out of his way. He joyfully licked my face, and me and my friends all laughed.

I fitted the equipment onto Toothless and immediately got on the saddle. If I had been impressed with Gobber's work in the smithy before, then this was on a whole new level. Everything fit my new leg perfectly, and the tail fin was similarly well built â€" but much more stylish, made from bright red, durable fabric and emblazoned with a horned skull design.

My friends lined up behind me, Astrid, and Snaketail, all on their dragons. I glanced at Snaketail from her perch high up on Horrorcow's neck and decided it was time for a reintroduction.

"This is Berk," I told her, sweeping my arm out in front of me to indicate the view. "It snows nine months of the year, and hails the other three. Any food that grows here is tough and tasteless. The people that grow here are even more so. The only upsidesâ€| are the pets."

We took off as one, twirling and dancing around and above the village. Through the plaza, down to the docks, and out across the ocean, my friends skillfully matched my every move.

"While other places have ponies or parrots," I continued absentmindedly to Snaketail as we flew. "We haveâ€|"

Simultaneously, we rose in joyful flight high above the island of Berk. "DRAGONS!" we roared as one, and Toothless, Stormfly, Hookfang, Meatlug, Horrorcow, Barf, Belch, Batwings, and Nightshade all gave their own roars of triumph and freedom.

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That would have been the absolute perfect ending for this fanfic, if it was the end of this fanfic.

But no, we still have "Riders of Berk" to get through! You honestly think I'd quit now?! Of course not!

On a side note â€" sorry, Hiccstrid fans, no kiss on the lips this time XD

But if you wait a few chapters, then I'll make it up to you (I'm so going to dieâ€|).

Review please, and stay tuned for the next epic chapter of "How to Train Your Dragon: Legends are Born!"

****OK, this is pretty much signals the start of the next (and larger) part of the fanfic! I have a few things to go over before we go onâ€¦****

****One, I'm going to be writing only the episodes that I find worthy enough to include.****

****Two, I'm going to have to stop somewhere. So don't get your hopes up if the TV series continues.****

****Three, I know this is quite obvious â€" but I don't own HTTYD or Riders of Berk.****

****So, let's continue with this fanfic already!****

****Ferdoos: Wait three more chapters, that's all I ask :)****

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This is Berk. For generations, it was Viking against dragon. The battles were ferocious. Then one day, everything changed.

I met Toothless. And together we've shown people here that instead of fighting dragons, we can ride them, live with them, and even train them.

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****Sea Around Berk****

"Alright, guys," I said to my friends, landing next to them on a huge rock "island" that towered up out of the ocean. "Best trick competition. Who's up first?"

Fishlegs started to volunteer, but Snotlout butted in. "Me!" he shouted. "Actually," said Fishlegs timidly, "I think it's" â€" "Me!" said Snotlout again, pointing to himself confidently.

"Oh, sweet baby Thor in a thunderstorm, GO!" said Astrid impatiently. Snotlout leaned back confidently on Hookfang and said smugly, "Don't worry, we'll go. And when we go, Hookfang and I are going to light the sky on â€" FIIIIIIIRRE!"

His boasting ended in a terrified scream as Hookfang suddenly leapt off of the island and dove straight down towards the water. At the last second, the Monstrous Nightmare leveled out, taking Snotlout on a widening course throughout the maze of rock spires that Toothless and I had traversed all those months ago.

Suddenly, after a minute of hearing Snotlout scream without stopping to catch his breath even once, Hookfang soared high into the sky, then folded in his wings and dove straight into the water like a giant red gannet.

They stayed under for about four seconds, then they burst out of the water. Hookfang made one last circle around in the sky, and then landed in his original position beside Stormfly and Meatlug.

Hookfang settled down with a satisfied grunt, and Snotlout examined himself all over. "I'm alive?" he asked in wonderment. "I'M ALIVE!"

Everyone looked at him in amusement. "I mean, of course I am," he snapped, sitting back down on Hookfang.

"It's my turn!" said Fishlegs excitedly. "Ready, Meatlug? Here we go!" The Gronckle gurgled confidently, then thrummed off into the sky. However, she made a nice, slow circle around our island, then landed right beside Hookfang and the Zippleback twins.

"Yes!" cheered Fishlegs. "New personal best!" He bent down to hug Meatlug, who gave him an affectionate lick on the cheek in return.

"Uh, my turn!" Snaketail piped up from her high vantage point on Horrorcow's long neck. The Grapple Grounder screeched in anticipation. "Please!" teased Snotlout. "How well can a vegetarian dragon fly compared to this deadly predator?" He gestured to Hookfang, who sneered at Horrorcow.

For an dragon who incorporated an unusual amount of vegetables in her diet, Horrorcow had a mean bite, to which I winced when she clamped her jaws around Snotlout's leg and flung him into the air. He landed right back on top of his dragon, but this time he stayed quiet.

Then, Horrorcow took off, streaking through the sky like a crimson ribbon. We all watched in awe as the Grounder curled herself into a wheel shape and began spinning dizzily through the air as she flew. How does Snaketail handle that? I asked myself as Horrorcow made two more circles and flew back between Astrid and I. Snaketail gave me a wink, which I pretended to ignore.

"My turn!" shouted Ruffnut, eager to best Snaketail (the two were really competitive, especially when they were trying to impress me of all people). "No, my turn!" interjected Tuffnut, never one to pass up an opportunity to argue with his twin.

"Uh, guys?" I said exasperatedly. "Same dragon." I pointed to Barf and Belch, who shared a similar sibling rivalry. "Oh, right!" Tuffnut said, eyes lighting up. Him and Ruffnut bumped fists before taking off.

Their flight started smoothly enough, but before long, they got into a heated debate over which direction to turn in. Barf and Belch lost patience after their heads slammed into each other, and simultaneously bucked their riders off of them and into the air.

As they started falling, their screams reached their peak. "This is awesome and scary!" commented Tuff with a highly amusing grin on his face. Three seconds before they would have plunged into the ocean, the Zippleback made a perfect, simultaneous catch, before flinging both Ruffnut and Tuffnut back aboard.

Barf and Belch flew back in with different expressions â€" Barf looked annoyed while her brother simply looked pleased. "Ughâ€" gasped Ruff. "We almost died."

Tuff agreed. "Yeah, I know," he panted, before sitting up and asking enthusiastically, "Go again?"

Before Ruff could agree, Astrid spoke up. "Hey, it's my turn!" Then she turned to me and smirked, "You might want to take notes."

She and Stormfly did a magnificent takeoff, then executed a string of moves that even had me impressed — first a skim across the water, then a sharp upward turn and twirl with the Nadder's wings folded across her body, then an ascending series of quick spirals into the sky. And they did this all while navigating through the rocky maze.

For someone who was initially terrified of that dragon, I caught myself thinking, Astrid's really getting the hang of this. Then Stormfly landed beside Horrorcow, with Astrid throwing me a smug glance over Snaketail's shoulder.

"Yeah, pretty good," said Snotlout cockily. "But can you do it without the dragon?" That earned him a savage punch on the shoulder.

I wanted to go last, despite Toothless' impatience, so that left Batwings. I turned to my right and suddenly found myself at a loss for words. The Siren was in his human form, with his wings folded up neatly on his back, clawed hands gripping the horns of the Whispering Death, Nightshade.

Snaketail summed up what we were wondering in a single question. "Um, why are you riding another dragon, Batwings?" He smirked and said, "Several reasons." Before he went on, I took a moment to marvel at the change that had undergone in the Siren. When we first met, he had refused to speak to any human except me. Now, he trusted all of us enough so that he could speak with his full voice.

"One," Batwings was saying, "it gives me the opportunity to learn first-hand about riding a fellow dragon. Two, it also gives me the opportunity to bond with and increase the trust between you Vikings and me. And finally, I also get to bond further with Nightshade."

The Whispering Death hissed contentedly and Batwings briefly nuzzled her. If it was odd to see a human-like creature engaging in such dragon-like behavior, we were used to it by now.

But now, Batwings and Nightshade took off, flying marvelously. They did a neat series of turns and twists, but then I got a shock. They were willingly flying on a certain collision course with the biggest rock spire of them all.

Just as I was thinking that this wouldn't end well, Batwings suddenly jumped off and spread his wings, diving down headfirst toward the water with both arms and wings outstretched. Meanwhile, Nightshade had burrowed into the rock spire with her rotating fangs, disappearing from view in less than a second.

Batwings dove closer and closer to the water, keeping parallel with the spire, when Nightshade resurfaced just below him, catching him only a moment before he would have plunged into the deep. We all cheered and clapped encouragingly as they came in for an awkward

landing.

"Well, looks like we have our work cut out for us, bud," I said nonchalantly to Toothless. The Night Fury growled confidently, then we tensed ourselves for what would happen next.

We didn't just dive â€" Toothless jumped headfirst off of the island, spreading his wings and diving straight down at impossible speed. Face rippling slightly, I pulled hard on the saddle, and we leveled out just above the water. We flew so fast and so close, we sent up a huge spray of water behind us.

Then, it was just like old times, zooming around every obstacle in our path. But the big finish was still coming as we neared a rock arch that stood separate from the others. As we rapidly neared it, I jumped off of Toothless' saddle and landed on the arch.

I ran across it, time slowing down for me. I knew that Toothless would be able to keep flying as long as he didn't try to turn, since the stirrup's design allowed the prosthetic fin to lock in its current position.

In the time it took me to reflect on this, I reached the edge of the arch. Jumping off of it, I landed right on top of Toothless, who had flown out from underneath it to make a perfect catch. Slipping my foot back into the stirrup, we turned and I coaxed Toothless to fire several celebratory fire bursts.

"Yep, they're still the best," I heard Astrid comment, and the others just gasped and cheered. "Another win, Toothless," I said, and he gurgled in a satisfied way.

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Yepâ€| dragons. Most people on Berk would say that life here is better since we made peace with them. Unfortunatelyâ€| dragons are still, well, dragons.

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****Berk Village****

As I walked around the village, I could see utter chaos unfolding. Again.

With dragons pretty much making themselves at home in Berk, the people were having a very hard time controlling them. I watched as a pair of Terrible Terrors stole food from one Viking, a Nadder perched on the roof of another frustrated Viking's house, and a Monstrous Nightmare tugging a sack of fruit from yet another's grasp.

"Look out, incoming!" shouted Gobber from his forge, and suddenly the air was filled with the thrumming of a thousand dragon wings.

"Dragon poo!" shouted several Vikings, taking shelter as quickly as they could. Then, dragons of all kinds flew over the village, dropping green, boiling hot dung all over the place.

"Ew, gross!" I exclaimed, backing away from the bombs. "Oh, poop! Oh

man, that's disgusting." I found myself beside a pair of older Vikings who were holding their shields over their heads like umbrellas.

"Hey, Mulch. Hey, Bucket," I greeted them with a sigh. "Every day at three," commented Bucket idly. "The regular at least. Tip of the cap."

Mulch said with regret, "Better were the days where it was kill or be killed." Then he suddenly cried out, "Hey! We got some fish for that father of yours! Bucket, give the boy the cod."

Bucket held up a torn-up sack without any fish inside of it. He looked at it, bewildered. "Did I eat it already?" he asked, totally befuddled. "Did I enjoy it?"

I hastened to correct him, "Uh, no, Bucket, the, uh— dragons did." I pointed to a Blundertail who was sitting behind a house, chewing loudly. At the sight of us, it roared and then retreated into the shadows.

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Most of us on Berk are willing to take the good with the bad. But there are those of us who will never accept the dragons, and will do anything to drive them away.

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The next morning, my father and Gobber were giving their daily instructions to the village. Sometimes I shuddered at the thought of ever becoming the chief, but the thought that there were other people like Snotlout who could do it seemed to encourage me.

"Stoick!" called out a voice brimming with hostility. _Oh no— I thought in exasperation. I knew who the voice belonged to, of course — Mildew, and his sheep Fungus, who lived on the highest point on the island and who could always find something wrong or inconvenient about Berk that he always demanded my dad to fix.

"Oh, here comes Mildew with the complaint of the day," commented Gobber sarcastically. The old man, indeed even older than Goathi, slowly walked up to where Stoick was standing.

"You picked a bad time, Mildew," Stoick said harshly. "I'm in the middle of storing food. The freeze is coming."

But if there was one thing I knew about Mildew, other than the fact that he was grumpy and did his best to spread that around, he was persistent. "It's the dragons again," he snarled. "Those demons are not fit to live around civilized men."

Batwings, who was amusing himself by expertly climbing an old catapult stationed next to the food stores, yelled down, "Neither are you, Mildew! Why'd you think they built your house so far outside of town?"

Despite myself, I chuckled at the Siren's sense of humor. Mildew spared a heated glare for Batwings before turning back to Stoick. "Very well, make your jokes. Meanwhile, these dragons are rubbing our

village raw! They're reducing houses into piles of rubble! They even disturb an old man's rest! Can't you see these bags under me eyes?"

Gobber and Stoick exchanged skeptical looks. Batwings landed lightly on his taloned feet and said, "Yep, he's hideous all right."

Mildew ignored that, and turned to the crowd that had gathered. "These are wild and unpredictable beasts!" he claimed. "They even cracked this man's skull like an egg." He rapped Bucket on the head with his staff, and the bucket made an audible clanging noise.

"Eggs?" said Bucket himself. "I love eggs! Scrambled, over-easy, poached!"

Stoick kept up his glare as Mildew continued, "You need to put those dragons in cages. If ya don't, they'll eat us out of house and home, and destroy the entire village!"

The crowd that had gathered was yelling in agreement and anger. "They don't mean any harm," I said quietly, stepping up beside Batwings with Toothless at my side. "They're just dragons being dragons."

My dad, at last, took charge. "Look, Mildew, if there's a problem, I'll deal with it." Mildew at last backed down. "Oh, there's a problem, Stoick. And I think I speak for the entire village when I say that you'd better do something about it."

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****Hiccup's House (Batwings' POV)****

This entire situation unnerved me, to say the least. I and the other dragons had only been living here on Berk for a couple of months. In those months, I had to admit that life was so much better. No raids, no hostility â€" OK, maybe some of that â€" but it had been a lot nicer than fighting to the death constantly.

I hadn't even met Mildew before today, but Hiccup and the others had told me plenty about him. I had overheard even more from Hiccup's father, who complained often about how difficult Mildew made his job.

While I could certainly see that Mildew had a point about the other dragons, I had gotten so comfortable living here with the Haddock's that, although I wouldn't admit it, I didn't want to leave. I often told them about the place I had been born â€" a distant island often called Siren Island because of the abundance of other dragons like me. The people there were called Peaceables, and had a generations-old habit of leaving us alone.

I always told my friends that Berk would never be my home and I could leave any old time I wanted to. But I think they could tell that I really liked this place and my friends, and would never willingly leave.

"We can't just let dragons run around like they own the place," muttered Stoick, pacing the room. Then he seemed to get an idea. "Weâ€¦ we could put up signs!"

Gobber, sitting in the corner of the room while carving out what looked like a duck decoy, said skeptically, "Signs, fer dragons?"

Hiccup sighed. "Not for the dragons, he means for the people." Gobber looked even more skeptical. I piped up from my perch in the rafters above the fireplace, "Signs, for people? From what I've seen, you Vikings aren't exactly avid readers."

Now Stoick was beginning to look flustered. "Then we'll build a huge net and stretch it around the plaza," he said impatiently. "Nets?" asked Gobber rhetorically. "Ya do know that they breathe fire, right?"

Stoick looked on the verge of giving up. "Maybe Mildew was right," he sighed, and I frantically moved to change his mind. But before I could, Hiccup intervened for me.

"Wait, dad," he said. "How about you let me take care of the dragons?" Stoick seemed surprised, whereas I was simply thankful for his offer.

"You?" asked Stoick in disbelief. "Who else?" Hiccup replied, as Toothless walked over to stand beside his friend. "If anyone can get the dragons under control, I can. I'm the best man for the job." As he said this, he idly scratched Toothless under the chin to prove his point.

"You're not a man yet, Hiccup," Stoick said bluntly. "Not if you don't give me the chance to be!" he protested in response. At a reassuring nod from Gobber, Stoick finally complied.

I smiled to myself, confident that my friend would be able to get my rowdy brethren under control.

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****Berk Village (Hiccup's POV)****

"Alright," I said, walking into the seemingly empty village with much confidence. "There's going to be a few changes around here." A solitary Nadder ran across my path and vanished. It seemed to have some destination in mind, so I decided to follow it.

Soon, I cornered it as it busied itself with trying to steal food from a Viking. The Nadder was growing more and more agitated, so I got in between it and the Viking and said, "Easy, easy!" I placed a hand on its nose, and the dragon quickly calmed down.

"OK," I said with satisfaction. But I had spoken too soon â€" a flock of chickens suddenly appeared from nowhere and startled the Nadder, who went off to chase them. I quickly spotted the source of the terrified poultry â€" a blue Gronckle was tearing its way through the village looking for food.

The situation quickly dove out of control. Dragons and Vikings were running every which way, and every time I turned, it seemed as if there was someone or something that needed my help. I looked frantically round for something I could do, and finally caught sight

of two dragons fighting each other in front of the barn. Several smoking sheep ran down the hills in terror.

"Toothless!" I called. "You stop that fight. I'll put out the sheep." As the Night Fury ran to do as I had bid, I raced after a sheep that had separated itself from its group.

I chased the sheep around and around the village, and just when I thought I had caught it, my jump fell short and the sheep ran right over me. I picked myself up painfully and resumed chasing the sheep.

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(Astrid's POV)

My friends and I, minus Batwings, were perched atop a catapult. We normally hung out here at this time of day, mostly to get away from the chaos that often happened on Berk.

"What is he doing?" asked Snaketail, pointing to someone running frantically through the village. It was Hiccup, trying and failing to take care of the dragons. "I think he's helping the dragons break stuff," said Tuffnut uncertainly. "Cool!" smirked Ruffnut, settling down to watch.

I watched the sheep run over him with a wince. "He looks like he could use our help," I said worriedly, not sure if we should go down after him into the thick of things. "Yeah, we'll help," Tuff said. "In a minute," Ruff finished for him. I snorted â€" apparently, her love of destruction outweighed her love of Hiccup.

Suddenly, there was the immense thrumming of dragon wings overhead. "Andâ€" it's three o'clock," I muttered.

I couldn't watch as the dung came flying down upon Hiccup.

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Hiccup's House (Hiccup's POV)

"Oh, everything hurts," I complained that night as I was settling in for a good night's sleep. "Even this." I held up my prosthetic to Toothless, and he looked at me with amusement and pity.

All of a sudden, there was a voice that sounded from downstairs. "Hiccup?" it called. "Astrid?" I replied, for indeed that was her voice. "Perfect," I muttered bitterly. "I don't look too beat up, do I?" I added to Toothless, trying to smooth my hair down. He just gave me another look, one with more amusement and less pity.

I turned to the sound of footsteps and saw Astrid walking up into my room. "Oh hey, Astrid! What a nice surprise!" I said with false delight. "So," she replied, "how was your day?"

I took a second to think, then waved it off. "Oh, uneventful. Hung around the plazaâ€" you know."

She gave me a knowing look. "Yeah, I do know," she said. "We saw you

out there. "It's hard to believe you're still standing." I dropped all attempts to remain cool and flopped down on my bed with a huge groan. "I'm going to be seeing smoking sheep in my dreams for the next month," I said exhaustedly.

"HICCUP!" came my dad's voice, followed by his characteristic heavy footsteps. "What's going on out there?" he asked when he had entered. "The plaza looks like a war zone!"

I hastily tried to calm him. The last thing I wanted was for the dragons to be caged up or leaving entirely. "I know this looks bad," I began. "Really bad," Astrid whispered "but this is only, uh, Phase One of my master plan."

That, at least, got Stoick looking curious and not mad. "Oh," he said simply. "So you do have a plan."

Batwings, from his usual nighttime perch atop my bed's headrest, took that moment to interject. "Of course he does!" he exclaimed emphatically. "It's very complex, with lots of drawings and, um, several large, moving parts. Yeah, it's, uh, pretty wild."

Stoick gave him a glance, then nodded. "This had better be real," he said to us, "because Mildew has stirred up the whole island. If you don't get these dragons under control, they'll be calling for their heads."

Both Toothless and Batwings shot me desperate glances. "Don't worry," I assured them. "Your heads aren't going anywhere."

But deep down, I wasn't so sure.

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****Might as well stop it there.****

****Review please, and I'll see you soon for the next chapter.****

15. Changing for the Better

****I've decided to split each episode of "Riders of Berk" that I decide to include into two parts. That way, the chapters stay pretty much the same length as the previous ones.****

****Ferdoos: Man, you readers are the necessity of invention. I never considered where Nightshade roosts or something.****

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****Arena****

I had to admit, even I thought my plan was a little crazy. But what other choice did I have? Letting Mildew get his way and having the dragons caged and sent away? No, we couldn't allow that.

So that's why we were here in the old arena, the one that hadn't seen any action since the whole Monstrous Nightmare incident. The others and their dragons were behind me.

"Train dragons?" asked Ruffnut skeptically. "Here? Where we used to kill them?" I slapped a hand to my face. I knew that everyone would question this. "Right," I explained with some exasperation. "Because we don't do that anymore."

Astrid looked hesitant. "I don't know," she said nervously. "The dragons do look a little edgy." Indeed, as I looked around the arena, I could see the dragons fidgeting and shuffling their claws, clearly on edge. In fact, only Nightshade seemed at ease here.

"That's because we're really sensitive," said Batwings matter-of-factly "his nerves weren't as bad because he had only spent a little bit of time here as a prisoner."

"Meatlug especially," added Fishlegs. He put a hand to his mouth and said quietly, "She lost a cousin here a few years ago. We try not to talk about it."

Walking up to me from Stormfly's side, Astrid said to me, "I can't believe your dad just gave us the arena!" She sounded very impressed and surprised, but it didn't actually happen like that.

"Yeah, it would be great if he did," I said gingerly, "but he didn't, so that's something else we probably shouldn't talk about." Now Astrid's brow furrowed with suspicion. "So we're going behind his back," she said accusingly. "There you go, talking about it!" I replied, stepping away from her.

I walked a pace or two toward the group. "Look, everyone, here's the thing. The dragons are out of control. We want them to live in our world without destroying it, but they can't without our help. They've been blowing things up in the village " we have to do something about that."

Ruff and Tuff were enthusiastic, but I soon found out why. "Right, we got this," said Tuff confidently. "Help dragons blow things up!" Ruff immediately began planning. "Here's how we're going to do it. First, we get them really, really angry."

Tuff scoffed. "That'll be easy. We anger everybody."

Snaketail looked like she had had enough. "Guys, this is serious!" she protested. "Mildew wants all of our dragons caged. I don't know about you, but that isn't okay with me."

The twins quieted, and I spoke up again. "OK, next problem. The dragons are eating everything in sight. Now, when a dragon grabs something it's not supposed to have" I demonstrated by waving a loaf of bread near Toothless' nose, and he eagerly snapped it up "you can get him to drop it by giving him a gentle scratch below the chin." I did so, and Toothless obediently dropped the loaf.

Snotlout walked up and snatched the bread from my hand. "Maybe that works for you and Toothless," he said smugly, "but Hookfang and me " we do things a little different."

He tossed the bread, and Hookfang caught it before I could react. Snotlout continued, "When I want this big boy to do something, I get right up in his face and yell " DROP THAT RIGHT NOW! YOU HEAR

ME?! "

Several people flinched at the sudden noise, but Hookfang just got annoyed. He spat out the bread and seized Snotlout in his jaws headfirst. "See, he dropped it," he said, voice muffled.

Tuffnut chuckled. "Uh, should we help him?" he asked. Astrid folded her arms in a satisfied way and said idly, "Yeah. In a minute."

Trying to get everyone back on track, I said loudly, "Alright, we have a lot of training to do!" I fished out two more loaves of bread from my basket. "But if we work together, we can get these dragons under control."

Everyone gathered around to grab a loaf, even Batwings. It seemed that he wanted to do his part to help control his more wild brethren. Although he did seem a little disappointed that his loaf of bread was shredded by Nightshade the moment it entered her mouth, the Siren didn't give up.

"Uh, can someone do that chin-scratchy thing?" asked Snotlout, still being held in Hookfang's jaws. "You guysâ€| you guys still there?!"

-.--.-.-.

****Berk Village****

When we walked into the plaza to start our jobs, I knew something was wrong. We were all eager to try out the things we learned in the Arena earlier, and do our part to calm the dragons and keep them in line.

But there was one problem. There were no dragons in sight.

"Hmm, no dragons," murmured Fishlegs in bewilderment. "That was easy," Ruff said idly. "Lunch?" asked Snaketail.

"That's weird," I said, almost to myself. "If the dragons aren't here, then where are they?"

My question was answered by a huge explosion that came from higher up on the island. I felt that sinking feeling when I saw flames leaping from the warehouse where we stored our food. "Something tells meâ€| that way," Astrid said unnecessarily as we ran to investigate.

It was worse than I had fathomed. Dragons were everywhere, making off with every scrap of food we had gathered over the months. Vikings were shouting and chasing the dragons, desperate and angry.

"Stormfly?" asked Astrid, scarcely able to believe it. Her Nadder was among the dragons eating from the piles of fish. She glanced over at the sound of Astrid's voice and looked at her guiltily.

"Nightshade?" Batwings said with the same level of surprise. The Whispering Death swung her head to face him, her multiple rows of teeth rotating as she chewed a huge load of chicken.

I raced inside the warehouse, only to see my father clearing out a huge load of rubble. The mess was far worse inside than it was outside. "They've eaten everything!" exclaimed Stoick. "We have nothing left for the freeze!"

Suddenly, Mildew and Fungus were there. "I warned you, Stoick," said the old man menacingly. "But didja listen? No, you put a bunch of teenagers in charge!" He turned around to glare at me and continued, "Look what the dragons have done now! Caging is too good for those beasts."

I protested with everything I had. "Dad, I swear to Odin that I can fix this. We were just starting to" â€" but I was cut off. "Enough, Hiccup. How can I trust you to control all the dragons when you couldn't even control your own?"

He gestured to one of the last piles of fish left behind. Toothless was there, happily munching on the dregs. "Toothless?" I asked in pure disbelief.

My father picked up several baskets and hurled them at Mulch and Bucket. "You two, man the boats! We need another catch!"

Mulch looked resigned. "It's no use, Stoick," he said. "It took us six months to catch all that fish." Stoick fiercely said to him, "Don't tell me it's too late! We have to try."

Chuckling nervously, Mulch whispered to Bucket, "Heh heh, don't tell the chief it's too late. You're always so negative." Bucket replied innocently, "I don't know what it is with me."

As the two of them meandered off, I gave it my best try as well. "Dad, please! I can fix this! I know dragons better than anyone!"

But did he listen? No.

"Not now, Hiccup," he said. "I have a village to feed. The dragons have done enough damage. By tonight, I want every one of them caged."

I looked at him helplessly. Mildew stumbled over and growled. "You can't just cage these dragons! You need to send them away now!" The angry mob behind him clearly agreed.

"You're right, Mildew," Stoick said, both harshly and sadly. "We'll cage 'em tonight, and in the morning, Hiccup will send them off the island."

He looked at me with genuine concern. "I'm sorry, son," he said quietly, and then walked away.

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****Great Hall (Batwings' POV)****

We all sat that night at the same table, picking at our food. I couldn't eat a thing. I just didn't want to believe that the dragons â€" my own kind â€" would be banished from Berk forever, so soon

after they had been newly accepted. Stoick had kindly made a single exception in my case (despite Mildew's disbelieving protests), but I felt far from happy.

"I can't believe we have to send them away," fumed Snotlout, sulking in his own blunt way. "It's going to be weird," murmured Astrid. "I've gotten used to Stormfly's face being the first thing I see every morning." I looked over at the soup she was playing with, and saw that the swirling liquid had formed the shape of a dragon.

"Every night before I go to sleep, Meatlug used to lick my feet," sniffled Fishlegs, much to the dismay of the twins. "Who's going to do that now?!" he wailed, throwing himself down onto the table and making our meals jump.

"I volunteer Tuffnut!" said Ruff brightly, but her sadness was still poorly disguised by the false cheeriness. "Whatever," her brother grumbled, for once without argument. "What time should I be there?"

"Come on, guys," Astrid said sadly, standing up from her unfinished meal. "Let's get this over with," sulked Snaketail. "This is the worst day of my life!" I murmured. Who would take care of Nightshade? The two of us had gotten so close.

"We can't let this happen," said Hiccup, staying behind with me. "Toothless is the best friend I ever had." He reached down to pet the Night Fury, who opened his eyes and gurgled contentedly.

Footsteps suddenly sounded, and we both turned. It was Mildew, carrying a bowl of soup. "Oh, Toothless, I'm going to miss you so much," he said regretfully, although the regret was obviously fake. I extended my fangs involuntarily, allowing them to flick forward from their usual resting position against the roof of my mouth.

"You know what your mistake was?" Mildew was asking Hiccup. "Thinking dragons could be trained! A dragon's gonna do what a dragon's gonna do. It's their nature – and nature always wins." He stalked away, whistling a cheerful tune.

Toothless growled at the old man's retreating back. He opened the doors to the Great Hall, allowing a fearsomely chilly wind to blast through and put out the central fire. The Night Fury's growl became a concerned warble, and he quickly restarted the fire with a bolt of flame shot from his mouth. "Thank you, Toothless," said a passing Viking, nodding to Hiccup and I as he passed.

I was surprised to see a look of dawning comprehension cross Hiccup's face. "You know what?" he asked me, or he might not have asked anyone. "Mildew's absolutely right!"

At first I was shocked, then concerned for his mental health, and finally comprehension dawned on me as well. "I see what you're doing," I said, a toothy grin splitting my face in two. "Let's tell the others."

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****Arena (Astrid's POV)****

We all landed in the dead of night by the entrance to the arena. When we did so, the dragons seemed to become weighed down by something. They seemed to know, and I don't know how they did, that we were getting rid of them.

Once we caged up our own dragons, we planned on gathering up all the other dragons and herding them in here. Then, Stoick and Gobber would see to their expulsion from Berk.

Around me, everyone was saying a last goodbye to their dragons. "I'll miss you, Stormfly," I said, hugging the Nadder. "Now go." I pointed with my torch toward the open gate leading into the arena, and she dejectedly walked in. The other dragons followed.

"It feels like these long sharp claws are tearing at this thing in my chest," said Snotlout, clenching his fists and grimacing. "That's what it feels like when you're heart is breaking," murmured Snaketail, close to tears. "What?! I don't have a heart! I'm not a _girl_," Snotlout protested.

The gate began to lower, casting shadows over the dragons. Only their eyes glowed in the darkness, eyes that swam with sadness. I looked away, and I could tell that the others were doing the same.

"Don't close it!" came the sudden cry, and we all looked up to see a black shape streaking out of the sky. It was Hiccup and Toothless, followed closely by Batwings. With one swift movement, Hiccup vaulted off of the Night Fury and ran to the still-closing gate. He yanked with all of his strength on the opening mechanism, and the cage opened again.

The dragons walked out again, ecstatic not to be caged after all. As they rejoined their respective owners, I excitedly asked Hiccup, "What happened? Did you change your father's mind?" Then I thought about it, and slowly added, "Or are we going behind his back again?"

Hiccup looked nervous. "Uh, ah, one of those," he replied, then Batwings quickly changed the subject. "Look everyone, the dragons are going to do what they're going to do. We just have to find a way to use that."

For the first time that night, I smiled.

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****Berk (Hiccup's POV)****

It felt good to be flying with my friends again, especially after what had happened yesterday. This afternoon, we'd be proving to my dad and the rest of the village how useful the dragons could really be.

We soared over the ocean, where a lone fishing boat was having trouble catching food. "Snotlout," I called, "scare us up some dinner." He was simultaneously skeptical and confused. "And how do I do that?" he demanded, as Hookfang hovered in place.

"Remember what happened during our last trick competition," advised

Snaketail, and he finally got it. "Ohhhh, right. Good plan," he said, then dove toward the boat.

Mulch and Bucket, after hauling up the net and finding it empty, screamed in terror when they saw the Monstrous Nightmare swooping in. Hookfang plunged past the boat and straight into the water, circling it in ever-tightening circles. When the dragon soared back out of the water, the nets were as full as ever. "Thanks, dragon!" called Mulch, and Snotlout cried out, "That's right! That just happened!"

The twins, Astrid, and Snaketail flew off where there was a break-out of sheep and yaks, while Batwings, Fishlegs, and I headed for the highest spot on the island. As we closed in, we saw Mildew hard at work managing his cabbage farm.

"Afternoon, Mildew!" cried Batwings, steering Nightshade down. The Whispering Death plowed her jaws into the ground, digging a series of parallel, exposed tunnels in the earth. Fishlegs sprinkled seeds into the trenches as Meatlug bumbled by, and I finished off by covering the trenches with dirt.

"It's three o'clock!" I called down to the old man. "Time for the fertilizer!" A horde of dragons flew over at the usual time and began to drop their dung all over the island. A good amount splatted around the cabbage patch.

As the dragons left, Nightshade coiled herself around the edges of Mildew's house and Batwings said, "Smile, Mildew! We just saved you three whole months of hard work!" Then Nightshade was off with the rest of us, leaving a very disturbed man behind.

The last task of the day was to help the Viking hunters round up some wild boars. Swooping down on Toothless, I moved close enough to the largest herd to scare them into stampeding. Occasionally, Toothless would shoot a fire bolt to scare the boars into turning in another direction. With some effort, we managed to herd them into the slaughterhouse. The Vikings near the building waved in thanks.

We had gotten a number of tasks that would ordinarily have taken days or even weeks to complete finished in just a matter of hours. "Well done, everyone!" I said as we landed in the plaza. "How did you know that was going to work?" Astrid asked me.

"Because they're dragons," I said matter-of-factly, smiling modestly. "And they're gonna do what dragons do. We just have to work with them and not against them."

But suddenly, an angry voice sounded from behind me. "There they are, Stoick," rasped Mildew. "Those dragons don't look like they're in cages to me."

My dad looked grim. "No, this isn't what I asked for."

My heart sank.

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****Arena****

If we were going to get punished, I could have done without the

publicity. There was a crowd ringing the arena, just like the day I had been tasked with killing Batwings. Stoick and Gobber were standing in front of us, about to give us our punishment.

"Oh no," worried Fishlegs, "what's Stoick going to do to us?" Ruffnut moaned, "I'm too pretty for jail." Tuff scoffed in reply, "Where'd you hear that?"

Stoick spoke up now. "You all disobeyed my orders, and now there will be consequences." Before he continued, Astrid whispered to me, "I told you we were going to get in trouble. You never listen to me."

I stepped forward with a deep breath. "Dad," I said, "if anyone's going to get in trouble, it should be me."

He shook his head. "No, you all had a hand in this. That's why" â€" "You're getting a dragon trainin' academy!" blurted Gobber, suddenly cheerful.

There were gasps all around, particularly from an appalled Mildew.

"Gobber!" scolded Stoick. "I wanted to tell them that!" I grinned uncontrollably, and glanced at Astrid. She grinned back.

"I'm sorry," said Gobber. "You're right, go ahead." My dad replied, "Well, you told most of it!" Gobber smirked and said, "Why don't yeh tell 'em the part about how proud yeh are of them!"

My dad shook his head and sighed. "Hiccupâ€¦ wellâ€¦ what he said."

I was amazed. My spirits lifted, and around me, everyone was breaking into smiles. "You've all made me very proud. This dragon training academyâ€¦ is for you."

He yanked a lever, and the largest of the cages opened. Out bounded our overjoyed dragons, whom we embraced. Horrorcow coiled around Snaketail and squealed with delight, Meatlug pounced on Fishlegs and licked him, and Batwings and Nightshade shared a rapid, enthusiastic conversation in their own language.

Mildew left in disgust. His sheep Fungus, however, stayed and watched.

"Now all you have to do is train them," my dad said as I petted Toothless, gesturing to the dozens of dragons perched on the wire netting overhead. "Not a problem, dad," I said with a mix of confidence and relief. "After all, I've got him," I added, petting Toothless again.

There was a muffled, not-so-subtle cough from over in my friends' direction. "And them, too," I amended, earning their smiles.

The multitude of dragons smiled as well with toothy grins that lit up the already-sunny afternoon.

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_Dragons can't change who they are. But who would want them

to?_

Dragons are powerful, amazing creatures. And no matter how long it takes me, I'm going to learn everything there is to know about them.

â€|Wouldn't you?

-.--.-.-.

****That's the end of the first episode, folks. Review please, 'cause we all like those, and wait for the next chapter, where you Hiccstrid fans will finally get what you've been waiting for XD****

16. Animal House

****Yep, I've decided to leave out "Viking for Hire", just because I didn't think that one was up to par.****

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Here on Berk, we made peace with the dragons. We're finally living and working together â€" and it only took us three hundred years.

There's one slight problemâ€|

We forgot to tell the animals.

-.--.-.-.

****Farming Lands (Batwings' POV)****

I watched, perched atop a small yak stable, as an aquamarine Deadly Nadder and autumn-colored Monstrous Nightmare shrieked at each other in anger. Unfortunately, they had chosen a sheep pen as their brawling ground. And the sheep were running over and into each other in an attempt to get away.

"Oh, not again," huffed Mulch, with Bucket at his heels. "You go on nowâ€| you getâ€| get, both of you!" With an effort, he chased the two away a fair distance.

"Alright, everybody, time to earn your keep!" Mulch said cheerfully as he settled down beside a yak to milk it. Bucket busied himself with checking the chicken coop for eggs. Even from a distance, I could see his bewildered expression as he lifted the chicken and saw nothing underneath.

"Chickens lay eggs, right?" he asked uncertainly. Mulch sighed. "Do we really need to go over this again?" he asked, to which Bucket replied, "No." But then he lifted up the sheep next to him.

"Apparently we do," I said, flying over with a couple of flaps. "Wool," I said, pointing to the sheep pen. "Eggs," I continued, pointing to the chicken coop. "And milk," I finished, indicating the yak that Mulch was milking. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Bucket cocked his head, still confused.

"Observe," Mulch said, sitting back down on his stool. "You grab the udder, like so, and pull." He pulled the yak's udder " but nothing came out. "Pull," Mulch said again. When the same result happened, he repeated with more force, "Pull!" But he pulled so hard, the yak kicked him off of his stool.

"Uh oh," I said, bending down to examine the underside of the yak. "I think we're empty. Again."

-.--.-.-.

****Cliffs (Hiccup's POV)****

I had decided to take a break from my schedule as leader of the BerkDragonAcademy and have a little fun. So when Astrid came up to me just then and challenged me to a dragon sledding race, I was more than happy to accept.

And that was how I ended up on Toothless' back, with him sliding across his belly down a huge mountain and his wings flared out like huge sails, and Stormfly in hot pursuit.

I encouraged Toothless to slide faster, and he bent low to the ground and let gravity do its work. The gentle sound of his stomach whisking against the new-fallen snow and the wind tearing at my face, not to mention the speed, combined to create an experience that was better than flying, in its own way.

Stormfly cut ahead, and I could hear Astrid's triumphant laugh carrying back to hit my ears. Smiling silently, I followed her every move, twisting and turning through the widespread forest of evergreens.

But then Stormfly raised her tail and sent a load of poisonous spikes flying our way. Toothless hastened to avoid them, and I cried out, "Hey, Astrid!"

She smirked back at me and shouted innocently, "Oops, did I do that?" And then she was off again, faster than before.

_Two can play at that game, _I thought as Toothless put on a burst of speed and overtook the Nadder. He flared out a wing, blocking Astrid and Stormfly from progressing any further. We pulled further ahead.

"Hey, not fair!" Astrid shouted, trying to move around Toothless' wing. Then we swerved to avoid a stunted tree in our path, whereas Astrid was too late to dodge. She ended up with a long scratch across her cheek and a face-ful of snow.

"It's going to be like that, huh?!" she yelled at me, half-scowling and half-grinning. "I have no idea what you're talking about," I replied calmly, before resuming the race.

Stormfly suddenly spat a fireball at a pile of snow off to the side. The snow exploded everywhere, and Toothless lost control. He spun like a top, and he only just regained his footing before Astrid shot ahead.

I turned in response to a muffled boom. Back at the impact site, Stormfly's fireball seemed to have started a huge avalanche. "Oh no," I murmured, instantly making up my mind to get off of the mountain. I clicked the stirrup, and Toothless jumped, ready for takeoff. But we plunged back into the snow.

I tried again and again, but we didn't get any farther off the ground. I glanced back and saw something that made my eyes widen. Toothless' prosthetic was frozen over, stuck in the folded-up position I had left it in.

That left me no choice â€" I had to continue sliding down the mountain. More importantly, I had to warn Astrid. "Wait up!" I screamed to them, now getting farther ahead, and I hastened to catch up.

"Astrid!" I screamed again, and this time she turned to see the avalanche rapidly bearing down on me. Stormfly promptly increased her speed, leaving me eating her dust. Over the next ramp she went, and then the two of them were airborne.

Toothless and I, however, simply tumbled back onto the ground once we went over the ramp as well. "Hiccup!" Astrid screamed from her vantage point, and in a second Stormfly was swooping down, prepared to help.

The avalanche was catching up, and I had a great view of the rapidly sliding snow and ice as I crawled from my position on Toothless' saddle, shimmying down his tail and trying to pry his prosthetic free. I looked up and saw Astrid coming to help. "No, go back!" I cried. "Save yourself!"

She shook her head. "There's a cliff up ahead!" she called back. "I'm getting you out of there!" She held out her hand, gesturing for me to grab it.

My brain worked furiously as I saw myself trapped between a wall of snow and quite literally a dead end. Astrid could save me, probably, but what about Toothless? Without anyone to fly him, and indeed without his tail fin working properly, he wouldn't be able to save himself.

One thing at a time, I thought. I reached out and firmly grabbed hold of her hand. She seemed to be exerting all of her strength trying to pull me up onto Stormfly's back. The avalanche was gaining on us all the while.

But then suddenly, we ran out of ground. The cliff loomed before us, and before we could react, Toothless and I went over. I tried letting go of Astrid's hand, but too late â€" she and the Nadder were already falling after us, shrill screams mixing with my own.

We hit the bottom of the icy ravine hard. Thankfully, nothing seemed to be broken, and even more thankfully, I was still alive. Dazed, I noticed the dim light of the canyon change to pitch black. Shaking my head to clear it, I realized that I was freezing cold. Shivering, I tried out my voice.

"A-Astrid?" I asked tentatively and shakily. My heart leapt when I

heard her faint response. "Hiccup, I'm freezing!" I weakly got on all fours and began crawling toward her voice. "Over here," I said, a little more clearly. I groped around for a while before I felt my hand touch something that felt alive.

Thank Thor, it was Astrid. Immediately, she moved over and clung to me tightly. My shivers stopped almost completely as I became warmer. I wrapped my arms around her and looked around blindly. "Where are the dragons?" came her voice, right next to my ear.

But then, there was a burst of blue light. It was so quick and sudden that my eyes had no time to adjust, but I could guess from whom it had come from. "Toothless?" I asked incredulously, just as another flash of light, white this time, emanated from just above me. "Stormfly?" Astrid asked with the same amount of surprise as I had.

There were a few more flashes of alternating color, and then suddenly, a dim ray of sunlight illuminated the area. When my eyes had adjusted, I saw that we were inside a dome of snow, with our dragons beside us. Their fires had burnt a hole in the snow, which allowed the distant sun to shine through.

"We're going to be alright," said Astrid, voice full of new hope. "Look what they did," I replied, my own voice mirroring the astonishment I felt. "They saved our lives!" Indeed, the two dragons had used their wings to create a barrier which had stopped the snow from crushing us to death.

Astrid and I simultaneously turned toward the other and instantly noticed how close we were to each other. Instead of pulling away, though, we drew in a little closer as if that would make us a little warmer. I couldn't help but think of how beautiful Astrid's eyes were up close.

"I'm so glad we're alive," she whispered. I just smiled, grateful as well. Then "perhaps it was to express her joy or simply because it was in the heat of the moment" she leaned forward and pressed her lips against mine.

Initially, I was stunned. But soon, I felt this inexplicable chill course through me. I felt colder than I had ever been, and before I could stop myself I was tightening my grip on her waist and pressing myself closer to her, eager for warmth.

I could hear Astrid giggle softly in response, and then she did the same. She deepened the kiss, sliding her hand up from my back to my head. I felt warmer than I had ever felt in my life as I felt her pull me closer and her surprisingly soft lips working against mine.

After what seemed like an eternity (when in reality it was several minutes), we slowly broke apart, although we still held on tightly to one another. Then, at the same time, we realized that Toothless and Stormfly were watching us with a combination of tenderness and amusement.

Frantically, we slid apart from one another, blushing furiously. "So... so we're good now," I coughed awkwardly. "Yep," confirmed Astrid, equally uncomfortable. "G-Good as new!" Then to make the

situation seem a little more normal, she punched me playfully on the arm.

It hurt, but after the kiss we had just shared, I couldn't have cared less.

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****Farming Lands (Batwings' POV)****

"Yep. Mm-hm. Yeah, there it is!" Gobber kept up the talk as he examined the yak. Mulch, Bucket, Stoick, and I were all watching him worriedly.

"Jus' as I thought," he said suddenly, sliding out from under the yak. "She ain't givin' milk. None of 'em are!" Stoick and I simultaneously rolled our eyes. "We know that, Gobber," the chief said impatiently. "We want to know why," I finished for him.

"This reminds me o' the time I moved me mother in with me goat," Gobber said, launching into one of his stories. Mulch and Bucket looked bewildered, and Stoick moved to intervene before he got going. I put a claw on his arm, restraining him. I looked him in the eye, telling him that it was alright for Gobber to continue. After a moment, Stoick nodded.

Gobber, meanwhile, kept talking as if we weren't even there. "â€| she was mean, ornery, ate everything in sightâ€|" I interrupted with a hesitant question. "Your goat?" I asked. "Or your mother?" Gobber smirked and finished, "The goat was so scared, she couldn't give milk!"

I rolled my eyes again and huffed. These Vikings and their Viking-ness, I said to myself. Mean mothers, ugly wives, shaggy beardsâ€| why can't these people be more like the Peaceables?

As I was thinking this, Gobber was saying, "The moral of the story is, mothers and goats don't mix. Same with farm animals and dragons." That caught my attention and I rose out of my thoughts.

"We stopped fightin' the dragons," Gobber prattled on, "and now they're around all the time! The farm animals are spooked." Almost the second he finished, a Timberjack soared over the farm with a roar that echoed across the peaks. Farm animals scattered in its wake, and a herd of sheep simply dropped to the ground, clearly playing dead.

"See?" said Gobber smugly. "Spooked."

There was a muffled groan. The three of us turned to see Bucket claspin' his head in his hand and stumbling around as if he had a killer of a headache. "Uh oh," said Mulch. "Your bucket's not tightenin' up on you, is it?"

Bucket stopped groaning long enough to say, "No, no it's not. I'm feeling justâ€| FIIIIINNNE!" He suddenly screamed and fell to the ground, clutching his head tightly. "When his bucket gets tight, it means a storm's comin'," Mulch explained to us as we watched curiously.

"No storm," Bucket rasped, "everything's fine." Mulch turned back to him and said warningly, "Bucketâ€¦" The half-brainless Viking turned to him, suddenly panicked. "I don't want there to be a storm!" he wailed. "If lightning strikes me bucket, I could end up less intelligent!"

There was a searing howl from Bucket just then, and Mulch rapped him on the head. "Oh ho ho, that's one tight bucket!" he exclaimed. "The tighter the bucket, the bigger the storm!"

Understandably, when I glanced at Stoick and Gobber, they wore skeptical expressions. "That's ridiculous," Stoick said. "Storms don't hit this early in the season." Gobber scoffed, "And besides, who ever heard of predictin' the weather with a bucket? That's what chicken bones an' goose feet are for!"

Mulch was indignant as he leapt to his friend's defense. "If you recall," he said dangerously, "that bucket o' his predicted the Blizzard of Oloth!" Bucket stopped moaning long enough to put in, "That was a bad one â€" it took us a week just to dig Mildew out!" I finished for him sarcastically, "And the rest of your lives to wonder why you bothered."

Mulch had a worried look in his eyes as he said to us, "Trust the bucket!" Stoick shook his head. "You trust the bucket. I want a second opinion."

And that was how we found ourselves on a lone mountain on the outskirts of the village. The peak was so small, the elder Goathi's house took up all of the available room, and more to boot.

"Goathi, we've come for your wisdom," Stoick quietly and respectfully told the ancient woman. "Is there going to be a storm?"

The elder started writing on her dirt-board with her stick. I couldn't make any sense of her scribbles. "Gobber, what's she saying?" I asked him, and he bent down to examine her work.

"She says," he replied slowly, "'What do you think?'" We all shrugged.

Goathi sighed and pointed with her staff to the house behind us. We saw that the windows were securely barricaded and there were sandbags all over the place. "How can you be so sure?" Stoick asked, turning back to her. "Was it the chicken bones? Or the goose feet?"

Gobber translated as Goathi began writing again. "Ah-hah, ah-hah," he said as he observed. "Yep, she said she could hear Bucket screaming from way up here."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise.

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****Berk Village (Hiccup's POV)****

Later that day, Astrid and I were sitting on top of one of the abandoned catapults, the same one in which Gobber had set camp with us way back when we were training to slay dragons. Fishlegs, Snotlout, Snaketail, and Batwings were all there.

"And the, the dragons used their wings to block the snow," I continued with my story. Fishlegs was fascinated – well, to be honest, more like jumping out of his pants with excitement. "I've never heard of anything like that," he said, speaking rapidly, "not even in the book of dragons."

Batwings snorted. "Of course you wouldn't have," he stated matter-of-factly. "Us dragons are very loyal. Just not to you Vikings. Most of the time," he added, shooting a nervous glance at Toothless and Stormfly lest he had offended them.

"I know, it's incredible!" blurted Astrid, unable to contain her excitement. "It's as if their protective instincts just kicked in!" I nodded and went on for her, "The dragons we've been fighting for years came to our rescue. If it weren't for them, we'd have frozen to death."

Fishlegs didn't lose any of his enthusiasm as he ran his mouth some more. "You know, you could have used your own bodies to keep each other warm," he babbled.

Astrid and I instinctively glanced at each other, then shuffled away from each other, blushing furiously. "Wh-who does that?" she asked, and I rapidly nodded my agreement.

Batwings flashed us a mischievous grin. The dragons had filled him in separately on what had happened, and I could instantly tell from that grin that they hadn't omitted a single detail.

"Hey, Astrid," said Snotlout. "If you're still cold –" he dropped the sentence and held out his arms invitingly. To be honest, though, it didn't look inviting to me.

Astrid's expression instantly went from embarrassed to menacing. She pounded one of the supports on the catapult with her elbow, shaking a huge pile of snow from the weapon and dumping it on Snotlout.

"Hey!" he protested, voice hilariously muffled. Astrid let a satisfied smile stretch across her face. Batwings fluttered down from above and offered to help Snotlout, a tiny lick of flame curling from his mouth. Snotlout hastily told him it was fine – it was obvious he didn't want the Siren's invincible fires touching him.

"Hey, Hiccup." The voice rang out without warning, prompting me to look down. The twins were staring up at us. "Your father's looking for you," Tuff finished. "He looked angry," Ruff added smugly.

"He's looked like that since the day I was born," I muttered. "It's probably no big deal." Just before I took off on Toothless, I caught sight of Batwings' worried, almost desperate look. _What was that about?_ I wondered as we flew off for my house.

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****Hiccup's House****

"We've got a bad storm coming," my dad said, pacing around the room. "We could be locked in. We might not be able to hunt or fish for

months." His voice grew increasingly " well, not worried, but something similar.

"It's too early for a storm," I told him skeptically. "We're in the middle of winter. _Devastating_ winter isn't due for another month."

Stoick was quick to deny my denial. "Not according to Goathi, and apparently, Bucket." I protested to him, "What should I do about it? I can't control the weather!"

My dad raised his hand for me to be silent. "No, but you can control dragons."

I was confused. "You mean there's a dragon out there that's causing this storm?" I asked him, worried. I hoped that a Skrill wasn't coming " according to Batwings, that dragon was Toothless' kind's eternal rival.

"No," my father admitted, "but if the other dragons don't stop scaring the animals, we won't have any provisions to live on."

Suddenly, the door opened, and Mulch and Bucket stepped in. I had heard the stories about Bucket's weather-predicting bucket, and to be honest, he looked just fine. It was hard to believe a storm was coming, but if Goathi had said so

Stoick took the pail from Mulch's hand and shook it. "Not a drop," Mulch said sadly. "And that was after yankin' on that poor yak for three hours."

My eyes widened. This _was_ serious.

"But it's not like the dragons are trying to be scary," said Batwings, arriving abruptly and unannounced. To my credit, I didn't flinch. Gobber and Bucket almost jumped out of their pants. "I mean, they don't even eat farm animals. They " we " only eat fish."

Gobber regained his composure and took a deep breath to steady himself. "True," he said, "but they are huge, breathe fire, and " now that we've made peace with 'em " are everywhere. The animals are terrified of 'em!"

Stoick walked up to me and said seriously, "This is where you come in and say 'I'll fix this'."

I opened my mouth a few times, but no sounds came out. Eventually, I found my voice. "OK," I said hesitantly, "but how much time before the storm hits?" Mulch stepped in and told me, "About a week."

Relieved, I said, "No problem. That's more than enough time."

But then Bucket clutched his head " with his hook clanging loudly against the bucket " and moaned. "Correction," Mulch amended as we all looked over. "Three days, six hours."

I grew slightly more worried. "OK, less time."

Perfect."

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****Arena, Three Days Later****

"Come on, big boy. You can do it!" I grunted as I herded a yak toward a Blundertail. I had originally intended to find smaller dragons and work our way up to the bigger ones, but we didn't have enough time. So I told Snaketail to come back with the first dragons she laid eyes on. Unfortunately, those dragons were a massive, scorpion-like beast and a sapphire, serpentine Grapple Grounder. Meatlug and Toothless were there too.

"You'll really like them if you get to know them," I fruitlessly encouraged the struggling yak. "The dragons look scary," Astrid added, "but they're just giant, scaly reptiles!"

Tuffnut snickered. "Just like Snotlout," he said, and Snotlout himself picked him up by the scruff of his neck. For a moment I thought he was going to hit Tuff, but a look of confusion entered his eyes, and he faltered. "You're the guy, right?" he asked. Tuff replied squeakily, "No."

Meanwhile the Blundertail and Grapple Grounder fought over personal space, their growls encouraging the yak we were handling to knock us over and run to the other side of the arena.

"What if we looked at this from an animal's perspective?" suggested Fishlegs, getting down on all fours. "Oh, hello, Blundertail. I'm just a little sheep, walking around, doing sheep things. Baa, baa!" The real sheep looked at Fishlegs skeptically as he shuffled around in circles.

"You know, he doesn't really seem so big"- Fishlegs looked up, and the Blundertail bellowed in his face. He screamed and scuttled off to cower under Meatlug. "I'm siding with the animals on this one," he squeaked.

I stepped in with my thoughts. "I've noticed that when you have a positive experience with something you're afraid of, it isn't so scary anymore," I explained gently, herding the sheep into a line, and then toward the dragons. "They just have to get to know them, and" - my plan literally went up in flames as the Grapple Grounder shot a missile of fire at the sheep, setting them all alight.

"At this rate, we'll never get any milk or eggs!" I growled to myself as Astrid put the fires out.

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****Berk Village (Stoick's POV)****

The wind howled, and there was the occasional rumble of distant thunder. No one was out and about, so Gobber and I were the only ones outside.

"Just as I feared," I said grimly, picking up a plank of wood. "We haven't had time to fully stock the food storehouse. If this storm is as bad as we think it is, we're never going to survive."

Gobber went to help me. "Not with this inventory," he muttered. "We're going to need everything we can get from those chickens and yaks." This prompted another round of muttering from my friend "I'm not comfortable in putting our lives on the backs of a brainless bird and a big woolly beast that sleeps in its own dung."

I glared at him slightly, stopping his rant before it got started. "Thankfully, our fate isn't on their backs. It's on my son's."

Perhaps I wouldn't have had much faith in Hiccup and his friends if I could have seen how much trouble they were having.

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There you go, about time for a bit of romance, don't you all think?

And just to make it up to you Hiccstrid fans, I think I'll have another romance scene in the following chapter.

Review please (I think I deserve one or two), and stay tuned for the next chapter.

17. Lost in the Snow

Here's the second part of "Animal House" as promised. Also as promised, another much-needed romance scene between everyone's favorite couple.

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Arena (Hiccup's POV)

The animals were running around in a panic from the dragons, and it was all we could do to calm them down as much as we could and group them all together again. I sighed under my breath, thinking, _This is hopeless._

Snaketail suddenly snapped her fingers. "Another way to help the animals overcome their fear is to show them that dragons have fears too," she said decisively, and I smiled at her gratefully. It was nice to see that someone other than Fishlegs and I was coming up with some good ideas. Unfortunately, it wasn't nice to see Snaketail winking at me suggestively in response.

"Remember Madguts the Merciless?" Astrid asked, and Fishlegs, Ruffnut, and Snaketail all shuddered involuntarily. Batwings gagged and replied, "Yep. He didn't go down so well!" We all gave him an odd look before Astrid got us back to her original statement.

"He was a pretty scary guy," she said, looking away from Batwings. "I was afraid of him until I learned that he, in turn, was afraid of the dark." Tuffnut summed it up "During the day, merciless!" But his sister interrupted him. "And during the night, Tuffnut."

Tuff slugged her in the arm. "Hey, that's a real problem!" he said

roughly, earning a scowl from Ruff.

"I'm just saying," continued Astrid, glaring at the two of them, "that learning that Madguts was afraid of something made him less scary to me." I got right behind her idea of thinking, not just because I was being loyal, but because I actually thought Snaketail and Astrid were making good sense.

"Exactly," I said, digging around in my basket and fishing out an eel. "So we just have to show the animals that dragons also have fear." I held up the eel, and the Blundertail and Grapple Grounder recoiled violently, snarls of fright issuing from their jaws.

The animals somehow understood that the dragons were terribly frightened of the eel. They bleated, clucked, and bellowed to each other, not looking as afraid of the dragons as they were a minute ago.

"I think it's working," sang Ruff confidently.

That was when I dropped the eel. Unfortunately, it was still alive and slithered rapidly toward the Blundertail. At first, it backed up, but when it bumped against the wall and still saw the serpent coming after it, it roared and turned around in fear. Its scorpion-like tail smacked a stray sheep, sending it flying clear across the room and into the far wall.

I groaned, close to a nervous breakdown. "Don't worry," Astrid reassured me. "Worried?" I said. "I-I'm not worried! Do I look worried?" She just sighed and looked at me sadly.

Batwings took a look at the sky, now constantly flashing with lightning. Without bothering to explain where and why he was going, he flew through a gap in the overhanging net and disappeared.

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****Great Hall (Stoick's POV)****

"Bring in everything you need!" I yelled to the crowd trudging up the steps to the Great Hall. "We don't know how long we're going to be hunkered down."

Mulch approached us, towing a distraught Bucket up the stairs in a wheelbarrow. "How's Bucket?" I asked him gently. "Look at him," he sighed. "He usually loves a wheelbarrow ride."

Suddenly, Batwings swooped in. "We're out of time!" he yelled over the wind. "We haven't had any success with the animals!" I looked at him grimly. "For now, we'll have to wait. There's no way we'll be able to help them now. Gobber, Mulch, you go with Batwings and get the kids. Bring them back here and make sure they're all safe."

Gobber nodded and Mulch followed him down the steps. Batwings soared ahead, leading them in the general direction of the arena.

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****Arena (Hiccup's POV)****

I had caught two chickens after the Grapple Grounder had scared the flock, and Snaketail and Snotlout were trying to catch the others. Astrid managed to get the dragons under control, while Fishlegs and the twins herded the sheep and yaks.

"You know what I'm learning from this?" I complained while trying to calm down the hens. "Chickens are, well, chicken." Astrid snorted at this remark as she firmly pushed the Blundertail back against the wall so it wouldn't threaten the animals again.

"What if we showed them how much they have in common with the dragons?" asked Tuffnut. We were both amazed and skeptical at his suggestion. "They both lay eggs, right?" he said, starting to doubt himself.

"A Terrible Terror laid one just last month!" exclaimed Fishlegs, who for some weird reason had the egg on him. He put down the egg, about twice the size of a duck's, and rolled it in front of the hens.

A curious bird flapped up on top of the egg and got herself comfortable. "See?" I said to the hens. "An egg's an egg, right, ladies?"

But then the egg cracked and exploded, showering sparks and flames everywhere. The chickens panicked and took off in a flurry of feathers, squawking hysterically. "Until it explodes," I finished bitterly.

The scattered chickens made such a racket that the other animals took it as a signal to panic as well. In the midst of the chaos, the arena gate could be heard opening. In stepped Mulch and Gobber. Almost as if on cue, a wind began blowing and snow began to fall. "Everybody out!" yelled Gobber. "The storm's here!"

I almost panicked myself. "But-but wait! We haven't made any progress with the animals!" I protested. Gobber scooped a chicken up with his hook and replied, "Yer father wants everyone in the Great Hall!"

Desperate, I tried to reason with him. "Take the others, then," I said. "I need to stay here and keep working with the animals. They're still afraid!"

But Gobber wouldn't hear any of it. "Ya can't get eggs from a frozen chicken!" he shouted over the sounds of the dragons, animals, and Vikings leaving. "We need ta get the animals in the barn!"

Just as I was about to give in, Batwings swooped down and yelled, "The barn's completely frozen over! There's no way we can get the animals in it without them freezing as well!"

Everyone stopped until Snaketail suggested, "Then we keep the animals in the Great Hall as well. Everyone, come on!" She led them out, hand grasping the hilt of her sword.

"Great," grumbled Mulch. "The animals and dragons under the same roof. This will not end up good."

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****Mountains****

Because the main paths from the arena, through the village, and to the Great Hall were slippery with ice and untrustworthy, we decided to take a shortcut through the mountains. Here, it was difficult to see with all the snow, and the wind cruelly lashed out at us, stinging our skin. The ground was thick with snow, muffling our footprints as we sank up to our calves.

The animals huddled instinctively close together to protect themselves from the biting cold, and together the Vikings and dragons led them on the right path. Occasionally, an animal would wander off by itself, and one of us would have to get it back on track. "Come on, come on, let's go!" said Fishlegs to a stray sheep, pushing it back towards its fellows.

But just then, something had to go wrong. A forked bolt of lightning struck a tree, toppling it just in front of Stormfly. Startled, her spiked tail whipped Hookfang across the face. Suddenly he became enraged, coating himself with flames and spitting sticky fire. The animals bellowed and scattered all over the place.

"Don't worry!" cried Snotlout. "I've got this under control." And just how under control he had it was confirmed a second later when a herd of yaks trampled him. "Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! O-OK, everything hurts."

The animals confused Fishlegs until he hit the ground dizzily. A flock of sheep ran over him, followed by Ruffnut. She almost caught a sheep before a chicken flew up in her face, causing her to lose her balance and end up on top of Fishlegs.

As I witnessed the animals vanishing into the trees, my mouth formed a firm line. I didn't like it, but there was only one thing left to do. I turned with one last glance at the retreating farm animals, then ran for Toothless.

"Where are you goin'?" asked Gobber incredulously. "After them," I replied. "It's impossible! You'll never get 'em rounded up in this storm!" Gobber argued. I ignored him "With Toothless I can. I have to try, or else we'll starve to death."

Gobber made a noise between a sigh and a growl. "Astrid, would yeh talk some sense into" â€" Gobber turned at the sound of her running footprints and saw her boarding Stormfly. "Oh, not you too!" he moaned, then as I took off, everyone else did with me. "Astrid! Yer not goin' withâ€" oh no yeh don't! Get back here, all o' you!"

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****Deep Mountains****

Almost as quickly as Gobber's shouts faded into the distance, the atmosphere darkened until it was almost impossible to see. Obliginglly, Toothless released a fire blast that lit up the forest around us. There was nothing but trees, snow, and darkness.

"You guys grab as many as you can!" I yelled back at the others. "We'll herd them back to the Great Hall!" Fishlegs raised a shivering hand and stammered, "Can we sw-swing by my house? I'd l-like to grab m-my heavy coat!" Snaketail called over to him, "You'd better suck it up or a coat will be the least of your worries!"

Tuffnut suddenly yelled from Belch's head to his sister, "Hey, check this out!" He promptly slapped himself in the face. "I'm so cold I can't feel my face!"

Ruff smirked before smashing her hand into his cheek. "Didn't feel it!" he taunted. "That takes all the fun out of it!" she grouched, disappointed. Batwings flew by on Nightshade, telling them to keep their minds on their job.

We flew past the last of the dense forest, past the same cliff Astrid and I had tumbled over a few days ago. On the other side, I could dimly see the animals wandering lost in the woods. "There they are!" I yelled over the wind.

We scattered, going after the animals. "Yaks to the left!" Snaketail called. "Chickens!" said Snotlout, blazing past her and almost clipping Horrorcow's wing. "Hey, give me some space! I'm flying here!" Snotlout scolded her, to which she scowled.

"Hey, chickens!" Snotlout called to the flock, swooping low over them. "Come on, this way! Follow me, come on!"

So busy was he that he hadn't noticed that Batwings and Nightshade were after the same flock. The Siren flashed past, herding the chickens away from the safety of the trees and into the open. "What are you doing?" demanded Snotlout, just when the ground started to shake.

Just in front of the fleeing chickens, Nightshade erupted from the ground. Unable to stop in time, most of the chickens tumbled into the hole she had created. "Good job, Nightshade!" Batwings complimented her, before shouting to me, "We got some of the chickens, Hiccup! But there are still some left!" I nodded to him and told him to take them back to the Great Hall, while he left the remaining hens to the others. The Siren nodded, then flew down the hole, shapeshifting as he went.

But Hookfang was right next to it, and seeing the eel-like dragon appear from nowhere startled him. "Where are you going?!" Snotlout cried as the Nightmare narrowly avoided a tree in their path. Soon, they were flying all over, swooping and diving like maniacs.

Meanwhile, Fishlegs and I tried to gather up some of the sheep. "Sheep! Hey, sheep, this way!" called Fishlegs. "Baa, baa! Hey, I think its working!" But he failed to see the overturned tree in his path until the sheep raced under it. Meatlug couldn't turn in time and ended up stuck beneath it. Toothless and I raced ahead, followed by Astrid and Stormfly.

"I got them!" she told me, and prompted the Nadder to fire a volley of tail spines. The spines fell around the sheep, instantly trapping them. "Yes!" she said triumphantly.

However, Hookfang plunged from out of the sky, knocking down the spines and sending the sheep everywhere. "Snotlout, what are you doing?" Astrid demanded. "You're all over the place!" As Hookfang continued his acrobatics, Snotlout called back angrily, "You try herding animals with a dragon that doesn't listen to you!"

Snaketail and Horrorcow went after the sheep, using the Grapple Grounder's long tail to herd the sheep into a tight group. The sheep were spurred on with every crack of the dragon's long tail. It wasn't long, though, until she saw some of the sheep break away from the main group and head toward one of the mountains.

"Hiccup, stray sheep!" she shrieked, and I was quick to act. I clicked the stirrup, causing Toothless to rotate just enough to avoid Stormfly. As we passed, I saw Astrid give me a thumbs-up as she went over to join Batwings, who had returned more quickly than I had imagined.

Even with Toothless' speed, I was still too far away to help the trio of sheep. I saw the smallest one slip off the icy ledge and slide rapidly down the mountain. I watched in horror as it slid right off a high cliff with a terrified bleat.

I clicked Toothless' tail fin into position, and we put on a burst of speed. Before I knew it, we were rapidly closing in on the sheep. The Night Fury made a fantastic catch, snagging the sheep in his talons. "Did you get 'im?" I inquired, and he dipped his head down to check. He raised his head and grunted in the affirmative.

I urged him close to the ground, where he went into a hover. Toothless gently placed the sheep on the ground, where it was hastily joined by the two others it was with. "Good job, bud!" I told him, and we flew off with the sheep staring gratefully after us.

"Hiccup!" I turned at the voice and saw Astrid and her dragon melt out of the thickening snow. "The storm's getting worse! I can't see a thing!" I nodded and told Toothless, "Give us some light." He sent out a pulse of fire that lit up the snowfields as it traveled.

I squinted at two figures that had appeared off in the distance. "Stray yaks, twelve o'clock!" I called, pointing at them. "I see them!" said Tuff. "And they are huge!" The Zippleback flew through the storm with surprising speed, extending their talons.

In a flash, Barf and Belch were flying back towards us with two hairy bundles dangling beneath them. "We got the yaks!" Ruff shouted in triumph, and I stopped dead when I heard a familiar voice yell, "Put us down now!"

It was my dad and Gobber! "Do I look like a yak ta you?" Gobber asked sarcastically, just as the Zippleback let go of them. He landed right next to a real yak, which snorted and walked carelessly away.

I landed right next to Stoick and walked shamefully up to him. "You shouldn't be out here, son!" he said, shielding his face from the increasingly harsh wind. "Dad," I muttered, "I'm so sorry I let you down."

He shook his head. "This isn't your fault," he told me. "Come on, we're taking you back." Gobber approached, as did the dragons from the sky. "Which way?" he asked. "Follow our tracks," Stoick replied, pointing off into the distance.

Um, what tracks? I asked myself. There was nothing but snow and trees as far as the eye could see, which wasn't very far anyway. "So much fer that idea," Gobber said skeptically.

"Sir?" came the voice, and we turned to see Fishlegs and the others standing there, shivering madly. "What do we do now?" I saw my father's gaze look the group over, trembling and twitching uncontrollably in order to try and fight off the chill.

He sighed. "Gather round," he said simply, holding out his arms. We all formed a tight huddle, trying to keep warm. Batwings wrapped his wings around himself with a sneeze. The twins kept close together, and even Snotlout didn't try and pretend he didn't notice the cold. I felt Astrid push closer against me, and I unconsciously put an arm around her shoulders.

But we knew it was futile. Sooner or later, we'd all freeze to death.

-.--.-.-.

(Toothless' POV)

I slumped down in the snow, exhausted. We had spent over an hour chasing after the animals. Even though an hour of flying usually wasn't a problem for me, it usually wasn't this cold either.

I was about to close my eyes to sleep when I caught sight of something a ways in front of me. My ears perked up in interest as I saw Hiccup and his friends all huddled together, while his father and Gobber tried to keep them warm. But I could tell that they were succumbing to the cold as well.

I instantly knew what I had to do. I stood up and called to the other dragons. "We need to help them!" I said urgently, and that got their attention. "Of course," said Horrorcow impatiently, thrashing her tail. "They're in desperate need of us," agreed Meatlug. "Fine, then," grumbled Stormfly. "Come on then, we don't have all night!" Barf and Belch said in unison. "Less talking, more helping," Nightshade put in softly.

Together, we approached the humans, and as one, we spread out our wings to shield them from the wind.

These humans were our friends, and what was more, they had freed us from the Red Death. That was a debt we knew we'd never be able to repay. _But we'll do everything we can to help regardless,_ I thought as I stood over Hiccup.

-.--.-.-.

(Hiccup's POV)

My eyes widened as I caught sight of something just behind the twins. Our dragons were approaching us, steadily and confidently as if they

had some purpose in mind.

Suddenly, I realized that they did have a purpose. All of the dragons spread their wings, forming a ring around us. Immediately, the wind ceased to bother us and we grew slightly warmer. My heart filled with hope.

"What are they doing?" asked my dad, bewildered. "They're protecting us," I said with wonder, staring up at the dragons' faces. "It's our natural instinct," Batwings told him, and indeed everyone else listening. My friends' faces were filled with awe and hope as their dragons stood guard over them.

Hookfang suddenly hissed and spat a wad of fire at our feet, making the snow sizzle. Meatlug and Stormfly did the same, and Nightshade momentarily left her position to fly above us and fire a single ring of flame down in front of us. Batwings hesitated before adding his fire to the centre of the circle.

All around me, my friends were relaxing as the heat traveled upwards, wrapping us all in its warmth. But soon, something seemed to have distracted Toothless. I looked up at him worriedly, wondering what it was he was looking at. Then I realized that he had spotted the family of sheep whose lamb he had rescued.

Without warning, Toothless bounded off into the snow toward them. The two largest sheep ran off instantly, but the little one stayed put. Toothless gently wrapped his tail around it and gestured with his head toward us. The sheep seemed to consider, looking at the dragons with fear in its little eyes, but eventually it began to move forward.

Toothless ran toward us again and took up his previous position, leaving an opening for the sheep to walk through. The lamb entered the circle, looking all around it in amazement as kind faces all around watched it. It settled down right next to me and bleated happily, comforted by the heat.

Encouraged by the little sheep's success, animals from all over began to move towards the fiery circle. One by one, sheep, yaks, and chickens came to us in order to huddle in the comforting warmth. I think I spoke for everyone that we were both shocked and amazed that the animals, suddenly, had shaken off their fear of the dragons.

I felt Astrid's hand creep out to grab my own. I smiled to myself, tightening my grip on her shoulder. I looked over at her just in time to see her kiss me on the cheek.

Blushing slightly at her smile, I looked around once more — only to see my friends staring at the two of us in shock. And believe me when I say that Snotlout's expression was priceless.

"Yer dragons are really somethin', Hiccup," Gobber said. "Yeah, I know," I replied softly.

I suddenly realized that everyone was deeply tired. But despite this, the howling wind, noise of the animals, and the cold that inevitably found its way around the dragons were keeping us awake. I yawned deeply, rubbing my eyes exhaustedly.

That was when a soothing melody began to curl into the air. Instantly, I fully relaxed and my eyes drooped. I instinctively looked over and saw Batwings singing, sending us all off into a much-needed sleep. Just before we did so, we simultaneously sat down in the rapidly-melting snow and willed ourselves to stop thinking.

Batwings' melody soothed us relentlessly, and before I knew it, I was asleep.

All through the night, although I had no way of knowing it, the dragons stood over us, wide awake, protecting us from the unforgiving elements.

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****Berk Village****

The next morning, everyone was flying into Berk on our dragons. The skies were crystal clear without even a cloud to mar the endless blue. With us, on the dragons' backs and in their talons, were the animals. They didn't seem to mind being carried back to where they belonged through the air.

We finally landed outside the Great Hall. Stoick pushed the doors open to the sudden cheers of the villagers locked inside. "They're all right!" exclaimed one Viking, and everyone else showered us with comments and praise of their own. But as we all filed in, I could hear Mulch mutter, "Oh no. Here come the dragons."

Right on cue, Hookfang entered the hall with a roar. But everyone gasped when they saw him lower himself down to the ground, allowing the group of sheep on his back to jump safely off. "Well, wouldja look at that!" Mulch said in wonder.

As the other animals and dragons joined the Viking crowd, I suddenly felt something appear under the chicken I carried in my hand. Instantly knowing what it was, I called for attention. "Everyone, the chickens are laying eggs again!" I held up the smooth white egg for everyone to see, and there was a fresh round of cheers.

"I was right, chickens do lay eggs!" said Bucket.

I simply stopped and watched the people, dragons, and animals mingle peacefully with one another. The sight brought a smile to my face.

-.--.-.-.

We made peace with the dragons when we saw that we could trust them. As it turns out, they actually have instincts to protect us. All of us.

Life on Berk just got a little warmer.

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****Ahh, that was an excellent episode. One of the best, in my opinion.****

****R+R please, and stay tuned for the next chapter!****

18. Viking for Hire

****OK, changed my mind. I've decided to include this episode anyway. It was too funny to leave aside, my apologies.****

****TRIVIA: How to Train Your Dragon was one of the movie choices I offered to everyone at my birthday party a while ago. Unfortunately, Wreck-it Ralph won. But I'm stubborn, and there's always next year!****

****Ferdoos: Does the title answer your question?
XD****

-.-.-.-.-..

Everybody needs a place in the world.

Some people are born to theirs. Some people discover theirs. And some people make a place for themselves.

But then, the world around them changesâ€¦ and the place they made is gone.

-.-.-.-.-..

****Arena****

Today, my friends and I were training at the Berk Dragon Academy. I had set up a scoreboard, and had split my friends into two teams â€” Snotlout, the twins, and Snaketail on one side, and Astrid, Batwings, and Fishlegs on the other. I was asking the two teams questions about dragons, jotting down points with every right answer.

But soon, I realized that I should have, well, balanced the teams out. Between Astrid's experience with dragons, Fishlegs' knowledge of dragons, and the fact that Batwings was a dragon, they were simply unbeatable. On the other side, there was nothing but cluelessness, confusion, and sometimes just plain stupidity.

"Now," I was saying, "each and every dragon has its own characteristics that give it its own place in the world. What dragon makes the best wielding torch?"

Batwings, for once, was stumped (probably due to his lack of experience with humans and human-made objects). But Astrid was quick to cover his ignorance. "Deadly Nadder!" she said quickly, and Fishlegs put in, "Its magnesium flame burns with the heat of the sun!"

I wasn't surprised, but I was impressed. "Cor-rect!" I said, placing emphasis on each syllable. "Point to Team Astrid â€” the score is now one hundred and ten to ten."

Astrid giggled. "And you guys started with ten," she snickered. Batwings yawned, clearly wishing he was joining the other dragons in their afternoon naps.

"Yeah?" Tuff challenged. "Well, the game's not over." I had to admit, he had a point there. But then "Wait. What team am I on?"

I mentally facepalmed. "Alright, moving on. What is the shot limit of the Hideous Zippleback?" I pointed to Snotlout's team. "I don't think they can count that high," Astrid whispered loudly.

"Oh, really?" smirked Ruff. "Let's find out. Barf, Belch?" she called, and the Zippleback twins were quick to reply. They continued spitting gas and sparks at the far wall, just missing the opposite team each time. Finally, their ammo wore out.

"Looks like its about three," Tuffnut muttered. "Yes, told you we could count that high!" crowed Ruffnut.

"Actually, it's six," I corrected them. "You're halfway there. That question was worth five points." Ruff did a victory pose. "Now were up to thirty," she smirked across the arena.

Astrid scowled right back. "All right, it's our turn," she said menacingly. "What happens when you shoot fire at the owner of a Deadly Nadder?" She whistled loudly, and Stormfly bolted awake, reflexively firing a dozen tail spines that pinned the four on the opposing team to the wall.

"No fair," complained Tuff. "She didn't give us time to answer."

Snaketail was incensed. "Here's a question," she growled, "what happens when I sic Horrorcow on you?" I was quick to interrupt, closing my book and saying loudly, "OK, so we got some really good training done today, right gang?"

Snaketail didn't listen. She took her position on the sleeping Grapple Grounder's neck and patted her jaw. Horrorcow woke up with a shriek and bucked Snaketail off, spitting fire wildly. A bolt hit Snotlout in the rear, and he dove screaming into a bucket of water that I had set up previously "just in case this sort of thing happened.

"This is the third time this week!" Snotlout complained as the fire extinguished itself. "Ahhh, sweet relief."

"Horrorcow never does that when you ride her," I told Snaketail, genuinely concerned. "Is everything OK?" As the girl picked herself painfully off the ground and the Grounder settled back down to sleep, Astrid taunted, "Maybe she just realized who her owner is."

Snaketail gave her an icy glare and stalked off angrily.

-.--.-.-.

****Berk Village****

"OK, gather 'round! Come on, one and all!" cried Gobber. Curious, I pushed my way to the front of the crowd. The burly blacksmith was standing behind a plain table with a huge cart of weapons at his side. I could already guess what he was doing.

"Yeh may think these dragon-killin' weapons have no more use," he continued. "But think again!" He pulled out a sword from behind him. "Fer instance, this longsword is now a lovely butter knife."

Gobber demonstrated, picking up a plate of toast and spreading the butter around with the blade. He looked down at the now-completely-decimated slice and added, "Also great at makin' breadcrumbs!" His smile grew a little more pained as the plate crumbled in his hook.

Suddenly, I was aware of another presence beside me. "Oh, this is a dark day," the voice murmured, and I could instantly tell who it was â€" Mildew. "A great dragon-slayer, peddling his weapons as kitchen utensils."

I ignored him.

"Up next," said Gobber, holding up a formidable-looking mace. "How about this, uhâ€" He trailed off as he looked around confusedly, clearly trying to improvise. When he caught sight of a horsefly landing on his table, he brightened and finished, "This handy fly-swatter!"

He crashed the mace down on the table, crushing it to splinters. "Uh, also good at getting' rid of unwanted furniture!" As he was saying this, the fly buzzed away.

I mentally facepalmed for the second time that day.

"Now, fer the lady o' the house," Gobber said with a flourish, walking over to a huge, portable catapult. "When the hubby's off pillagin', how are you gonna protect yerself from home invaders? No problem when ya have big Bertha!"

He knocked affectionately on the catapult, which promptly flung a huge boulder at a distant house. I winced visibly.

But by now, the crowd had begun to disperse. "Wait! There's more!" called Gobber desperately. "Ya haven't seen everythin'! I haven't cleared out me dungeon yet!"

Now it was only me and Mildew left. "Oh, it's hard to watch," said Mildew sadly. "Especially for you, eh Hiccup? The feelings of guilt must be tearin' at your insides. I mean, you put Gobber out of business with your little peace pact with the dragons. You ruined his life. Bravo!"

Mildew left, and thus I was the only one around to hear Gobber mutter, "It's okay, Bertha. We'll find a place for ya."

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****Hiccup's House****

Toothless and I sat in my room, legs dangling over the edge as we looked out into the night sky. I don't know what Toothless was thinking about, but I could tell he was concerned for me. I was upset about Gobber and how, indeed, my "peace pact" with the dragons had

displaced him.

"You know, Gobber made this for me," I said, pointing to my leg. Toothless seemed to understand, but he said nothing. "He taught me everything I needed to know to make your tail." Still no reply, but I could tell that Toothless knew that Gobber was important, especially to me. He had been like the father I never had back in the old days.

Suddenly, the door slammed downstairs, and Batwings shifted in his sleep on my bed's headrest. I walked downstairs to see Stoick hand up his helmet and sink into his chair, exhausted.

"Everything OK, dad?" I asked. He groaned in response. "Ugh, I was all over the island," he said. "First I married the Svenson girl to the Endergard boy at dawn, then down to the fields where some kids were tipping over yaks, then back up to the newlyweds to settle a domestic dispute."

I handed him a mug of water. "Thank goodness that wedding's over," he muttered before taking a deep drink. As I went over to tend the fire in the fireplace, I heard him say under his breath, "Sometimes I wish there were two of me."

There it was â€" the answer!

"Dad, there are two of you!" I said excitedly. "Was that another crack about my weight?" he demanded. "No," I said, exasperated. "I meant Gobber. He can be the other you!"

My dad paused. "Gobber? He's too busy making all those dragon-killingâ€" He trailed off and started again, "I mean, he used to be busy, until youâ€" which is great! Except for Gobberâ€"

I almost chuckled at his awkward attempts to amend each sentence. "Exactly my point," I told him. My dad stood up and said to me, "You know, that's actually not such a bad idea. I could use a right hand."

I did laugh this time. "Which works out great, because that's kind of the only one he has."

-.--.-.-.

****Berk Village (Stoick's POV)****

Gobber and I walked through the village, where all the other Vikings were hard at work with their daily business. "I greatly appreciate you coming to help, Gobber," I said. He earnestly replied, "I'm just glad I could find time in my busy schedule, Stoick."

I nodded and held out a piece of parchment. "I've got a busy day ahead of me, now," I said, ripping the sheet in two. "Here's your half." Gobber took the sheet and looked it over. "This should be interesting," he said with mild enthusiasm.

"Now remember," I said seriously. "Some of these situations are delicate. They require diplomacy." Gobber rapidly assured me, "Oh, of course. I'm great atâ€" that."

I was surprised. I mean, I knew he had given plenty of good advice to Hiccup over the years, butâ€¦ "You? You can speak to people with tact and sensitivity?"

A new light sprang to Gobber's eyes. "Oh, I thought it meant clubbin' people on the head and askin' questions later. But I can give your thing a shot." He limped away, whistling cheerfully.

I hoped it was just my undercooked breakfast that was making me feel funny.

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****Hiccup's House (Hiccup's POV)****

My dad sat down at the dinner table and held two solid blocks of ice to his temples. He groaned, long and loud. I winced, knowing that my advice last night probably hadn't helped.

"Two-block headache, huh, Dad?" I asked delicately. "You know, I think you're being a wee bitâ€¦ rough on Gobber. It was his first day, after all. Tomorrow will be much better."

Stoick agreed with me. "Oh, it will be," he said. "Because it won't involve Gobber."

I was confused. "What are you talking about?" I asked. _It was that bad?_ I thought to myself.

"I tried to fit a square peg in a round hole, and it ended up sinking a ship and naming a baby girl Magnus. I'm not saying she didn't look like one, butâ€¦ try telling that to her parents."

I winced. "Well, we still have to help him!" I said, almost to myself. Stoick held up a hand for quiet. "We don't have to do anything. You, on the other hand, will be very busy finding a job for Gobber."

I facepalmed for the third time.

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****Arena****

All I saw were skeptical looks all around me. "You're bringing Gobber here?" asked Fishlegs. "He's going to be great," I assured him. "Nobody knows dragons like ol' Gobber. He's spent a lifetimeâ€¦ uhâ€¦ studying them."

I could already tell that this wasn't a good idea. But what choice did I have? I needed to help Gobber, whether I liked it or not. And finding a place for him in the Academy seemed like the only option available right now.

Suddenly, the arena gate behind me opened, and Gobber stepped in. "I'm back!" he said cheerfully. "Didja miss me?" I opened and closed my mouth, but no sound came out. He was carrying his entire array of dragon-slaying weapons with him. Now I could see why everyone was reluctant about allowing him to join the Academy.

I decided to welcome him regardless. "First of all, thank you for coming," I told him as he wheeled his wagon into the arena. "Second of all, ah, tiny question. Why did you bring yourâ€¦ you knowâ€¦"

Gobber finished for me in a chipper voice. "Killing things?" he confirmed. "I thought we'd train 'em by threatenin' ta kill 'em. Tha's how me daddy taught me ta swim." He held up a weapon that looked like a hideous amalgamation of an axe, sword, saw, mace, and spear.

There was silence, before Gobber crashed the weapon down on the ground. "School's in session!" he called.

The dragons booked it out of the arena â€" first Stormfly, then Meatlug, Barf and Belch, Horrorcow, Batwings, Nightshade, and Hookfang. Their panicked shrieks became fainter and fainter as they flew out over the ocean.

While everyone was dismayed and worried, Gobber didn't look a mite concerned. "Eh," he commented idly. "I didn't like school much either."

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****Four Hours Later****

Toothless and I were relaxing in the arena alone â€" Gobber was gone, and Toothless was watching me draw something in my sketchbook â€" when my friends returned. They hopped off of their dragons, who looked like they had gotten the panic out of their systems.

"What's wrong with you guys?" I asked worriedly. Indeed, everyone was stretching and groaning, panting and sighing. "We were riding our dragons for hours," complained Astrid, something she almost never did. "It took forever to catch them and bring them back after Gobber scared them away." She glared at Stormfly, who was smart enough to back away from her rider when she was in this mood.

"Yeah, sorry about thatâ€¦" I said sheepishly. "I just don't know what to do with him."

I looked toward the twins. Ruff was kicking her brother mercilessly in the rear, seeming to be really enjoying herself. "Do you two always have to fight?" I asked in exasperation. "No, it's okay," panted Tuffnut. "I asked her to do that. Just trying to get the feeling back." Ruffnut glared and bent over. "You going to return the favor or what?" she asked.

I turned away from them. "I've flown for hours on Toothless, and I've never had a problem," I said in bewilderment. "That's because you have a saddle," Fishlegs pointed out.

Something about that word rang in my mind. All of a sudden, I had the perfect idea. "Saddles!" I said, snapping my fingers in realization.

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****Gobber's Forge****

"Saddles?" asked Gobber, honestly delighted. "I love it! I've got so many ideas!" I handed him a few papers, and he threw them away after one look. "But not like these. Good ones."

I hastily picked the papers up, which indeed had several of my designs on them. "I'm glad you're excited," I told him hesitantly. "But I do think that there are things in my designs that you could use. I mean, you did teach me everything I know."

Gobber turned to me, sharpening an axe he had found lying around. "Exactly," he said smugly. "That's why you should let Gobber do what Gobber does best. I've been makin' saddles since you were in diapers â€" in fact, I made yer diapers."

I sighed. I had to handle this delicately, like some of the situations Dad was always going on about. "I know you know what you're doing," I began, "but keep in mind, every dragon is different. So you need to adjust the" â€" but Gobber didn't let me proceed any further.

He dropped the axe and silenced me with a final, exasperated, "Hic. Cup." I paused while he nudged me pointedly with his hammer. "I may have taught you everything _you_ know, but not everything _I_ know."

With that, he went back to his work. I rolled my eyes and huffed under my breath, "Suit yourself."

But later that evening, when I was about to take Toothless for a little evening flight, I heard lots of noise coming from Gobber's forge. One of the noises was his singing, and the tune went something like this:

"_I've got me axe and I've got me mace,_
And I love me wife with the ugly face,
I'm a Viking through and through!"

"You know, Toothless," I said to the Night Fury, and he turned his head to listen, "Gobber only sings that song when he's actually really happy."

Toothless smiled and gurgled in agreement. "I think we did a good thing," I finished, a satisfied smile stretching across my face.

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I think it's worth noting that this chapter saw one of the rare times I used the Hideous Zippleback's full name. Oh, there, did it again! XD

Review please, and I'll see you all again very soon!

19. Gobber's New Job

**The original title was going to be "A Jobber for Gobber", but I

scrapped it. It didn't sound too good to my ears.**

But honestly, look at all the chapters I've published in such a short time. I think Batwings must have scorched me with his invincible flames, because I've been on fire for a while!

Matt: Sorry to burst your bubble, but Snaketail isn't a Siren. But you just gave me a great idea for later in the storyâ€|

-.-.-.-.-

Arena

"OK, this is an exciting day for all of us," I told my friends. Gobber was with me, and he had told me that morning that he had finished making saddles for all of my friends' dragons. Needless to say, everyone was very excited.

"Gobber has been working hard toâ€|" I started to continue, but was pushed aside by the blacksmith. "I think they might wanna hear from the artist himself," he told me proudly. "I've made a lotta saddles in my day. Horses, donkeys, and now dragons. But these saddles are special. They're like me children â€" tha' is, if ya strap yer child to a flaming reptile and ride on it. So, without further adoâ€|"

Gobber tossed the cloth covering the saddles, revealing them in all their glory. But that was when I began to get that sinking feeling. Did saddles normally have such heavy-duty weaponry attached to them? I certainly didn't think so, and Batwings was equally as deterred.

"Wow, Gobber," I said. "This is certainlyâ€| not what I had imagined." He took that in stride and replied, "How could it be? I'm Gobber! No one knows what it's like ta live up here." He tapped his helmet with his hammer knowingly.

I looked at the nearest saddle. "Is that a" â€" "Yep, flamethrower," Gobber confirmed, giving it a little demonstration. "Didn't see that one comin', didja?"

Gingerly, I responded, "Uh, no. They kind of come with one built in, actually." Gobber smirked. "I know, but really. Can ya really have too much firepower?"

The twins caught our attention. Barf and Belch's saddles had catapults strapped to them. Tuff and Ruff loaded rocks into the catapults and fired simultaneously. However, their aim was poor, and the rocks thumped against each of the Zippleback's heads. They slumped to the ground, instantly unconscious. "Catapults for the twins?" I asked sarcastically. "Not a very good idea."

We looked at Fishlegs, who had strapped a saddle to Meatlug. Unfortunately, dangling from the saddle were several iron maces, and Meatlug was struggling to rise into the air. "You can do it, girl," he was saying timidly. "Just think light thoughts!" But thoughts were no match for four huge weapons, and the Gronckle just thudded to the ground in a daze.

"Come on!" Gobber yelled. "That saddle can't weigh much more than Fishlegs!" Fishlegs himself replied indignantly, "My mom says I'm just husky."

Snaketail, meanwhile, was struggling to load a saddle onto Horrorcow. Sadly, the Grounder wasn't cooperating. She was incessantly scraping her head against the ground and growling. Even for a Grapple Grounder, that was too restless.

When Snaketail finally got the saddle on, Horrorcow roared and flung it right off, sending it thudding against the far wall, spitting fire everywhere. "Come on, Horrorcow, what's wrong with you?" she asked half-gently and half-frustratedly. The dragon coiled up, facing away from her. "OK," she snarled, temper rising. "Who wants to trade dragons?"

Snotlout laughed. "Yeah, like I'd trade my perfect dragon for an angry oven."

Not everyone was unhappy. "These saddles are actually pretty good," commented Astrid, as she and Batwings leisurely flew around on their respective dragons. "Wait 'till ya try the horn!" Gobber called over.

Both of them blew, and the horns automatically extended. The bellows of the two horns combined grew so loud, it aggravated Stormfly and Nightshade. Nightshade hissed "it sounded inaudible compared to the horns' racket" and dove under the ground, taking Batwings with her, and Stormfly flung spines everywhere, making us all duck and dodge. Snotlout was pinned to the wall. "Really, again?" he asked in dismay.

"Uh, you know," I began with some disgust, "we're really gonna need to make a few" "Gobber enthusiastically interrupted, "Changes! Way ahead o' ya. I've got so many new ideas!" He winked and tapped his helmet again. "It's gettin' crowded up here," he said with a chuckle.

Much later, when the sun was setting and everyone else except Toothless (and Snotlout) were gone, I was cleaning up the arena. Apparently we weren't doing a very good job, because when Stoick entered, he said, "My Odin, what happened here? This place looked better when we were killing dragons here."

I looked around at the burn marks, craters, Nadder spines, and Whispering Death holes riddling the Academy. "Yeah, we sort of got Gobbered," I replied, for lack of a better word.

"Well, you know Gobber," Stoick said sadly. "He means well but doesn't always do well. So, what are you going to do about him?"

My voice carried all my regrets and hopelessness. "I'm gonna clean up his mess and make a few changes to his work," I said dejectedly. "Look," Stoick said, and I could tell that I was about to receive a father-son lecture. "Gobber's like family."

I interjected with a protest. "I know! That's why I can't say anything to him!" Stoick replied grimly, "No, son. That's why you have to. It's not fair to you, and it's not fair to Gobber."

Far from happy, I argued, "Why do I have to say something to him? You didn't, you just passed him off to me!"

My dad wasn't hurt. "That's what the chief does," he told me. "He delegates. Look, I gave you this Academy because it's the best thing for Berk. Now you have to do what's best for the Academy. I'm sorry, but what's best is very rarely what's easy."

He put a strong arm around my shoulders and led me out of the arena, with Toothless following. I smiled to myself â€" it had been so long since we had walked like this, not since the last time we had gone for a little fishing trip.

"What about him?" Stoick asked idly, gesturing to Snotlout, snoring softly and still pinned to the wall. "Leave him. He's going for a record." My father nodded wisely and replied, "Enough said."

We walked a bit more before I turned to him hopefully. "Hey, Dad. Do you think we could do a little fishing before the sun sets?"

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****Gobber's Forge****

The moon was high in the sky when my father and I got back. We hadn't meant to be out so late, and we were exhausted, but happy. My dad hoisted the basket of fish onto his back and told me that he was going straight to sleep. I told him I'd have a talk with Gobber.

As Toothless and I approached the forge, I could hear Gobber humming to himself happily. "You never know, bud," I told him. "Gobber might have looked at my plans and is actually making the saddles better." Toothless nodded, just before a huge explosion rattled the night and caused smoke to fly from Gobber's windows.

"Or maybe not," I sighed, and we kept walking.

While Toothless stayed outside, I went in the smithy. "Gobber?" I asked, only to find a crossbow aimed directly at my head. "Don't shoot!" I cried, throwing up my hands. "I'd never shoot yeh, Hiccup," Gobber told me reassuringly. "Unless I absolutely had to."

I laughed nervously as he put away the weapon. "You know, about the weapons," Gobber said conversationally. "Maybe the catapults were a bit too much for some o' the dragons yesterday. So I'm goin' a different way. I've taken out the two big ones."

I was very happy and very relieved to hear that. "Gobber, that's great," I told him, just as he turned away from his work bench. "And replaced 'em with six little ones!" he crowed, holding up a bunch of spoon-sized catapults that couldn't have thrown pebbles.

"Gobber, we need to talk," I said, voice heavy. "I-I think it might be time for you toâ€¦ take a little break." He snorted. "In case ya hadn't noticed, the only time a Viking takes a break is when he's dead."

I sighed heavily. "Maybe break is the wrong word," I amended. "The thing is, I'm not sure things are working out." I took a deep

inhalation and sadly pronounced my next sentence.

"I'm gonna need to take you off the saddle project."

Gobber stopped working and laid down his hammer. There was a very long silence. Finally, he spoke. "Yer gettin' rid o' me, Hiccup?" he asked, sounding sad and dejected, with a tiny spark of hope at the center of his voice, the hope that I was wrong. "Now I see why ya had me put down the crossbow."

I felt awful, but not as awful as I had imagined. My dad was right â€" this was the right thing to do. "It's just the saddles," I reassured him. "I'm sure we can find something else for you."

At last, Gobber turned around, but only partially. "I don't need yer pity. I've lost an arm and a leg â€" I think I'll survive losin' a job."

I placed a hand on his back and patted it sympathetically. Then I left with only one last look at the displaced blacksmith.

Joining Toothless outside, I could feel his sad gaze on me. He knew what had happened in there, and he was wondering how to cheer me up. "Oh, that was awfulâ€" I murmured. "I feel so terrible. I don't know what could be worse."

All of a sudden, there was a round of screaming from deeper in the village, followed by a terrifying roar and a burst of flame. "OK, looks like I'm about to find out," I said to myself.

A crimson, serpentine dragon smashed its way through the village, tail striking at everything and everyone that caught its eye. Vikings ran in fear as fire burst from its mouth. Two of those Vikings were Snotlout and Snaketail.

My eyes widened at the dragon. It was a Grapple Grounder, but not just any old Grapple Grounder. It was Horrorcow! What had possessed the vegetarian dragon to go on a rampage?

Snaketail was too frightened to speak, she only clutched my arm tightly and hid behind me. Snotlout panted, out of breath. "Hiccupâ€" he wheezed. "I neverâ€" thought I'd say this, butâ€" Hiccup, HELP!" His voice went from tired to hysterical in an instant.

Horrorcow roared to the heavens, slithering rapidly up a building and spraying fire everywhere. Miraculously, nothing actually caught fire. The Grounder wasn't aiming at anything, simply shooting at whatever grabbed her attention. And with her being a Grapple Grounder, those things were many and varied.

Vikings fled in the masses from the raging dragon, but me and my friends rushed to the scene. "I don't know what it is!" Snaketail told me frantically. "I was just patting her head! She loves that! But this time she went crazy! My dragon hates meâ€" We gathered a safe distance in front of the rampaging Grounder, who was shaking her head rapidly from side to side, embers dribbling from her jaws.

"I've heard that a pet takes on the characteristics of its owner,"

stated Fishlegs. "I think that's what's happening here." Snaketail went from fearful to wrathful in less than a second, savagely punching him in the gut. "Yep," he rasped painfully, "I rest my case."

Occasionally, I noticed that Horrorcow would scrape her head on the ground as if scratching an itch, or trying to eat the pavement. A realization burst in my mind. "When's the last time Horrorcow ate?" I asked Snaketail. "Not for days," she replied.

I reached into a nearby basket and pulled out a cabbage. "You hungry, girl?" I asked softly, and the Grounder calmed down at the smell of the cabbage. She eyed me balefully before I tossed her the cabbage. Horrorcow instantly snapped it up and chewed, but then shrieked and spat out the chewed-up wad of vegetable matter right at Stoick.

"Ewww, sorry about that, Dad," I said to him. "We have to bring this dragon under control!" he said forcefully, throwing the slimy cabbage out of his beard and having it eagerly caught by Toothless. Don't ask me why he'd eat such a disgusting thing.

"I can do this, Dad!" I said to him, then turned back to Horrorcow, my hand held gently out in front of me. She kept up the baleful glare, but didn't move. I patted her on the head and said, "There you go. There you go."

But when I reached out with my other hand to scratch her jaw, the Grounder shrieked again and blew fire straight at me. "Hiccup, run!" screamed Astrid as I just avoided the burst of flame. "Way ahead of you!" I called back as Toothless ran to protect me.

There was a brief struggle between the Night Fury and the Grapple Grounder, and it ended with Horrorcow reaching back with her jaws and flinging Toothless off of her. He hit the ground with a growl and just avoided a quick tail lash and a flurry of kicks. I remembered from the Book of Dragons that Grapple Grounders preferred close combat, pummeling their prey into submission before finishing it off.

"Toothless, stop!" I yelled, and I pushed him out of the way just before he would have been victim to a fire blast. Instead, it set a house on fire, and the Vikings taking shelter inside were forced out. One of them was a little blonde girl, and Astrid panicked at the sight of her.

"Arachne!" she called out, then hurriedly explained to me, "I need to get my little sister out of there. I'll see you later." Without waiting for a response, she ran after the little girl.

"I'm sorry, son," my father said to me, resting a meaty hand on my shoulder. "I've seen enough. We tried it your way."

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****Gobber's Forge (Batwings' POV)****

I watched, sadness in my eyes, Stoick enter with a fearsome expression on his face. I was at the back of the forge, unseen. By

instinct, I knew why the chief had come here.

"Gobber, we need you!" he said fiercely. The big Viking sniffed. "No ya don't," he muttered. "Nobody needs me. Nobody needs any of us. Not even you, Bertha." He sat down sullenly on the catapult.

"Are youâ€¦ crying?" asked Stoick incredulously. "Course not," he replied sadly. "Just choppin' onions." I reluctantly came out of hiding and pointed out, "There are no onions."

If they were surprised at my sudden appearance, the Vikings didn't show it. "Not anymore," Gobber replied to my statement. "Look what I used to chop 'em with!" He held up a mace.

"There's a dragon in the plaza that's out of control," Stoick said, and I shuddered. No one knew better than me what an angry dragon was capable of.

"Why don't ya call Hiccup?" Gobber asked, sounding as if the words were painful. "No," Stoick said firmly. "We need you."

Those three words were all Gobber needed to hear. He realized that he was needed, and I realized that I probably didn't want to see what was going to happen next.

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****Berk Village (Hiccup's POV)****

We were all there, besides Astrid and Batwings, watching Toothless and Horrorcow stand their ground across from one another. Neither was willing to back down an inch.

"Come on guys, think!" I said desperately. "What haven't we tried?" All I got was silence. "Snaketail, you have an idea?" I asked her, but before she could respond, Snotlout let out a strangled, "Gobber."

We all turned to see the blacksmith armed to the teeth, looking more than ready for battle. "Stand back!" he said with more ferocity and more determination than I had heard from him in a long time. "I'm here ta do what I do best."

Snaketail gaped. "He's going to kill my dragon," she said, voice breaking. "No, he's not!" I said firmly, trying to keep her calm. "Uh, yes he is," Tuff piped up. "You don't use that stuff to butter toast." Ruff piled on, "I mean, we would, but definitely not you."

I ran to my father. "Dad, you can't be serious!" I said in shock. "Horrorcow is Snaketail's dragon!"

Gobber stopped me. "Sorry Hiccup," he said. "Sometimes ya hafta fall back on the old ways."

I argued back with all of my heart. "Horrorcow is a good dragon!" I said to him, both gently and firmly. "She's a good dragon!" Snaketail echoed, tears welling in her eyes. "There's probably just something wrong with her," I continued, trying not to make Gobber feel like he was being attacked. "There's definitely something wrong with her!" Snaketail sobbed, voice rising.

"We have to try and help her!" I finished. "We can't get rid of her just because she's having a bad day!" Stoick intervened at this point. "A bad day for a dragon can be a disaster for us. That's not a risk I'm willing to take."

Then the time for discussing and arguing was over. Gobber threw two bolas, tying up Horrorcow's wings and back legs. She waved her front claws in front of her threateningly, blowing fire. But suddenly, her supply ran out.

"Ha!" Gobber said triumphantly. "Yer all outta fire!" He drew his sword, prepared to lob off Horrorcow's head with one stroke.

"Gobber, I can't let you do this," I told him, clinging to his sword arm. "I don't have a choice," he told me, shaking me off.

In the short time he did this, Horrorcow lashed her tail, cleaving through the ropes that tied her limbs. She rapidly scuttled forward, reared up in an S-shape, and screeched defiantly in our faces.

We both stopped and looked in her mouth, completely stunned. "Do you see that?" Gobber asked, momentarily shocked. "I do," I replied with a similar amount of shock. I let go of his arm just as he sheathed his sword. "Time ta put this beast outta her misery," he said menacingly.

"Hiccup, what are you doing?!" Fishlegs yelled, but I held up a hand to silence him. The twins shielded their eyes. Snaketail buried her face in her hands. I caught sight of Batwings, perched on a rooftop with Nightshade by his side. Astrid and Arachne were huddled together some distance away.

With a yell, Gobber jumped right on top of Horrorcow, climbing up onto her neck and reaching into her mouth. The Grounder shook her head crazily from side to side, but Gobber held fast. With a mighty wrench, Gobber pulled his hand out of her mouth and allowed himself to be thrown to the ground.

"You didn't kill her!" Snaketail cried. "Fer a toothache?" Gobber asked skeptically. "What kinda lunatic are ya?" He held up the disgustingly rotten fang that he had pulled.

Horrorcow immediately calmed down, and ran toward her owner with a squeal. Snaketail laughed joyfully as the Grounder nuzzled her and lifted her off the ground.

I smiled at the two of them. Snaketail leapt off of her dragon, and both approached Gobber and I. "Thanks, Gobber," she said, voice high with delight, and she enthusiastically hugged him.

Then she turned to me. "And thanks to you, Hiccup," she said, throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me soundly on the cheek. If I could have blushed any harder, I would have done a Hookfang and burst into flames.

Suddenly, Astrid was there. She mercilessly punched Snaketail in the stomach, and then kicked her to the ground. I couldn't help grinning, although I did feel very sorry for Snaketail.

"I rotten tooth, I don't know why I didn't think of that," I said to myself. Gobber turned to me with a giddy smile. "That's because yeh're not Gobber!" he said proudly. "I've forgotten more about dragons than most men'll ever know!"

He limped toward his cart full of weapons and said in a satisfied way, "Well, time ta put the girls away." But just as he laid his hand on the cart, an idea, a brilliant idea, came to light in my mind.

"Gobber!" I called. "Not so fast." His response was a knowing look and a smug grin.

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When the world around you changes, the good men find a way to change with it. And Gobber is one of those good men.

In fact, he's one of the best.

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As I sat on a hill observing a flock of dragons line up in front of a building to get their teeth cleaned, a jolly, familiar voice could be heard bursting forth in song.

"_I've got me axe and I've got me mace,_

And I love me wife with the ugly face,

I'm a Viking through and through!"

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I cannot believe I even considered skipping this episode. That, in my opinion, is an absolutely wonderful ending. It shows you how happy Gobber really is in his new place in the world, and because of the crisis he's been through, I really think he deserves it.

He's also my favorite character in the series (besides Hiccup, of course), for the record.

Review, or I'll make sure you're around next time Horrorcow gets a toothache.

20. A Snoggletog to Remember: Part I

Oh, how I loved "Gift of the Night Fury". Although it technically isn't an episode of Riders of Berk, it's still the same franchise, so I have a right to include it.

Not to mention that the Christmas theme gives this the potential for a ton of Hiccstrid, which I know you all will love.

Plus, I'm sure you readers would simply like it if I included it. So, here it is!

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This is Berk. It's set in the balmy, fun-in-the-sun climate that will give you frostbite on your spleen.

The one upside is our annual holiday. We call it Snoggletog. Why we chose such a stupid name remains a mystery.

But with the war long over, and dragons living amongst us, this year's Snoggletog promises to be one to remember.

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****Hiccup's House****

The atmosphere was quiet, and my room was very dark. This meant that there was still time before the sun rose, but my sleep was suddenly interrupted by a huge crash from up on the roof. The ceiling shuddered, and I tiredly rolled over onto my back.

The next time this happened, it felt like the entire house was shaking. Rolling my eyes and yawning, I sat up on the edge of the bed and stretched tiredly. Still rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I groped for my helmet. This was a special time of year, after all, and I wanted to wear the helmet Stoick had given me as a sign ofâ€¦ well, I don't know. I didn't wear it at all, so I thought it would be nice to wear it for once.

I walked outside, into the crisp, cold morning air. It helped to wake me up, so I walked down the steps and around to the back of the house with a new energy. I looked up at the roof and sure enough, Toothless was jumping eagerly on top of it, causing shingles to fall off.

"Good morning, you overgrown newt," I greeted him sarcastically. The Night Fury gave me a series of gurgles and growls which I took to mean that he was amused. I imitated him mockingly, then questioned him, "Do you always have to wake me up so early to go flyIIINNG!" My question turned into a startled yell as I abruptly slipped on a patch of ice.

Toothless jumped down from the roof in time to catch me. "Whew, thanks, bud," I said, heart still pounding. "Stupid leg," I muttered, kicking my prosthetic against the house, then grinned at the dragon. "Yes, yes, of course we can go flying."

I grinned wider at Toothless' enthusiastic response, but cringed at his breath. _That does it, _I thought decisively. _No more Icelandic cod before bed for him._

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****Berk Village (Batwings' POV)****

The entire village was out and about, with everyone chattering excitedly. I heard a multitude of both human and dragon voices coming from all direction as they all happily worked, decorating their village for this holiday called "Snoggletog." I knew that the Peaceables celebrated this holiday on SirenIsland, but since we dragons never really mingled with those folk, I knew almost nothing

about it.

Nevertheless, as I followed Stoick and Gobber around the village, giving them a helping claw whenever I could, I was learning more and more about the holiday and its strange traditions. Wreaths were nailed to the sides of houses, lanterns were lit all over, and a huge, fake tree was erected in the plaza. Vikings used shields to decorate this incredibly lifelike fir, giving it a festive touch.

I was in high spirits along with everyone else. I saw Astrid and Stormfly hard at work nailing shields to the tree, while Astrid's sister Arachne played with Meatlug under Fishlegs' watchful eye. Dragons were flying everywhere, carrying decorations and occasionally Vikings as they all worked together to give the village a celebratory feel.

"Odin's beard, Gobber," Stoick was saying. "Vikings spending the winter holiday with dragons. What would our fathers think?" Gobber laughed in reply, "They woulda thought we'd lost our minds!"

Stoick chuckled, and when everyone had finished decorating an hour later, he stood in front of the tree and raised his hands for attention. "Well done, all of you!" he said loudly. "I never thought I'd live to see this day â€" peace on the island of Berk. You've all helped to make this the greatest holiday we've ever seen!"

I cheered along with the Vikings and other dragons. I was glad to see that we were all excited about celebrating Snoggletog, which was in only a few more days.

But suddenly, there was a distant wail, long and loud, that carried all across the island. The crowd instinctively craned their necks to look up at the sky for the source of the sound, and almost instantly spotted it.

It was a huge Skrill, bigger than any I'd ever seen, flapping almost leisurely through the sky. It didn't seem to have noticed the island, as it apparently had some destination in mind. It cruised past, flapping its wings occasionally in an effort to speed up. Another cry came from its jaws, and as it did so, an enormous flock of dragons appeared from the clouds behind it.

The Skrill was leading them all somewhere, naturally. Skrills, after all, were considered to be dragon royalty and often led large dragon clans. But I was confused, and indeed everyone else was too, about where the dragon was leading the others.

Suddenly, as one, all the dragons crawling around Berk raised their heads toward the immense flock. The Skrill turned its head and saw them watching. It screamed and jerked its head, as if telling them to follow. A second passed, and then a Blundertail stomped and scuttled its way to the top of a house and bellowed back.

At that signal, every dragon gathered in the village began to fly off toward the flock. "What in Thor's name?" asked Gobber. "Come back, Hookfang!" Snotlout called. "Where are you going?"

Fishlegs, always a quick study, frantically called out for Meatlug. "No, don't leave, Horrorcow!" Snaketail cried. "Stormfly, no!" Astrid screamed. But it was too late, as every dragon was already up in the

air and soaring up to join the Skrill's group.

I was watching with a mix of bewilderment and awe. Never had I seen such a gathering, not even on SirenIsland. _Where are they going? What's happening?_ One question after the next hit me until my head was swimming.

And then I heard something call to me in my mind. Instantly, I knew what I had to do, where I had to be. The call sounded again, much louder, overriding every other thought I had. _I have to go with them,_ I thought, completely at the mercy of my instincts.

I shrieked, unaware of the Viking eyes suddenly on me. Getting a running start, my talons scrabbling on the icy pavement, I beat my wings strongly and lifted into the air. I was completely oblivious to the cries of the Vikings, and even to my friends, as I desperately flew after the already-thinning flock.

A tiny thought formed at the back of my mind. _Mating season has come again,_ I realized. _And this time I am of age._

Soon, the isle of Berk had disappeared. Not that I bothered to look back.

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****Sky (Hiccup's POV)****

Toothless was certainly ready and raring to go. "Come on, bud," I cried as we skimmed through and over the clouds, "let's see what you've got today."

I clicked the fin closed, and Toothless folded up his wings and shot straight down like a black arrow. We pulled up just as we were about to hit the rough water, and shot across to the mess of rock spires surrounding Berk. Over and around them we flew, twisting and turning.

Finally, after a full hour of executing more of these daring maneuvers, I caught sight of a small rock arch rapidly coming closer. "You ready?" I asked him, slowly withdrawing my foot from the stirrup. "Steady, steadyâ€¦" I murmured as Toothless struggled to maintain his flight position.

I hesitantly stood on top of the saddle, watching as the rock arch came even closer. At the last second, I jumped with all my might, completely passing over the arch and landing roughly on Toothless' back again. "Yes!" I proclaimed, slipping my foot back into the stirrup and allowing Toothless to even out in flight. "Finally, that worked!"

Toothless warbled happily as I steered him up into the clouds. "What do you say, bud?" I asked him, patting him on the side. "You want to go again?"

But the words were hardly out of my mouth when I saw what was coming up ahead.

A gigantic Skrill raced out of nowhere and screeched at us. Just before it would have slammed into us, we flew out of the way.

Toothless growled threateningly, and the Skrill shrieked even louder, diving after us. I could tell that it hated the sight of a Night Fury, and would never pass up the chance to hurt one.

My foot worked furiously as Toothless fought to dodge the dragon's white fire blasts. But soon, we found ourselves in the middle of a huge swarm of dragons! There were dragons of all kinds, flying in the same direction " I even saw a few Blundertails, curled up tightly as other dragons carried them through the sky.

All of a sudden, the Skrill was no longer on our tails, belting out a final threatening screech as it flew back to resume its position at the head of the flock. By now, the dragons were beginning to thin out as they passed us mindlessly. It was as if they hadn't even noticed us!

But then, there was a shriek, and I tore my eyes from the dragons behind us to face the front. A figure flashed into our path unexpectedly, its wing knocking off my helmet. "No, my helmet!" I cried as it dropped. I forced my attention from it and instead concentrated on the creature flying around us.

I gasped. It was Batwings! What was he doing here? Even from this distance, I could see his blue eyes, with their pupils nothing more than thin slits. Then, he was off, following the other dragons and their Skrill leader.

Toothless was busy staring into the briny deep far below, turning his head back and forth anxiously. I knew he was looking for what I had dropped. "We can get it later, bud," I told him with a final backwards glance. "We need to get back to the village and find out what's going on."

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****Berk Village****

When Toothless and I landed, I saw dragons in what looked like a state of paranoia and panic. Their eyes were trained on the huge flock above, not even noticing their Viking companions as they took off after them.

"Astrid!" I yelled, seeing her standing in the midst of the crowd. "Hiccup!" she called back, noticing me and racing over. "What's going on? Where are they going? Even Batwings and Nightshade left!"

Suddenly, all the adult Vikings were there, frantically asking questions. "Why did they leave? What if they never come back?" I heard these two questions repeated over and over as I was mobbed by the frenzied Vikings.

"Stop!" Stoick's voice boomed over the commotion, and he forced his way through the crowd. "Give him a chance to speak!" He turned to me and asked gently, "Hiccup, where are all of our dragons going?"

I couldn't look at him as I murmured to the floor, "I don't know, Dad."

I turned at what sounded like Toothless' roar. He was perched on the

edge of the village, on a small cliff overlooking the coast, standing on his hind legs. Stormfly was hovering over him, anxiety present in her eyes. Finally, she called back to Toothless with one last warble, and was gone.

At sunset, there was a huge meeting in the Great Hall. Everyone was there, and my friends and I were hanging back to watch. "Snoggletog is ruined!" someone said loudly, voice ringing over the muttering.

"It's not ruined!" Stoick yelled, answering the unknown Viking and silencing everyone else. "We're Vikings! We've been perfectly happy celebrating Snoggletog, without the dragons, for generations. And there isn't any reason why we can't do so again. We just have to have faith that the dragons will come back soon."

Another voice rang out. It was Gobber's. "Yeh're right about that, Stoick!" he said, supporting the chief as always. "We're Vikings! We're tough!" He raised his prosthetic arm, which had a set of jingle bells attached to it. What's more, he was carrying a colored lantern, and wearing a festive green shirt and a reindeer-horned helmet. The jingle bells rattled loudly, and he quickly amended, "Most o' the time."

My friends and I left the adults and walked out of the Great Hall. It was cold, and the village was empty, but there was no wind and the silence was refreshing.

"That was depressing," muttered Ruff. "I know!" said Astrid, who looked more so than I had ever seen her — even when Mildew had convinced Stoick to send the dragons away. "I was looking forward to spending the holiday with Stormfly."

I went to comfort her, but my words of encouragement were cut off by a cheerful, whistled tune, courtesy of Fishlegs. "What are you so happy about?" asked Tuffnut bluntly. "Don't you miss Meatlug?" Fishlegs stopped whistling and stammered, "Um, uh, I— Of course I do! I-I miss h-her so much!" He suddenly sobbed and wiped his face with his arm.

"Wait, I've got it!" Astrid crowed suddenly. "Why don't we come up with a bunch of new holiday traditions? You know, to bury the sadness!" The idea didn't get much support until I glanced once at her and said, "Actually, Astrid might be on to something."

Astrid's smile seemed to light up the night. But the moment was ruined by Tuff, who said even more bluntly, "Easy for you to say. Your dragon can't go anywhere without you." There was a hint of bitterness in his voice.

I looked up toward my house. Indeed, Toothless was perched on the edge of the cliff there, staring up into the sky and fidgeting nervously. My spirits dropped — Toothless wanted to go with the others, but he couldn't. Not without me.

"Must be nice," Snaketail said sourly. The others left for their individual houses, leaving me there alone.

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****Berk Village, Morning** **(Astrid's POV)****

I stood back to admire my work. I had spent the better part of an hour in my family's kitchen, mixing yak milk and eggs and other things into a huge mug. Hopefully, this new drink would help bring some Snoggletog spirit back to Berk and chase away the depression.

I gathered the mug, two or three cups, and a large shield to carry them on, and walked outside, taking a deep breath through my nose. The air felt gloriously refreshing this morning.

I saw my little sister and her friends sulking near the plaza. Precariously balancing my heavy armload on one arm, so to speak, I reached down to ruffle Arachne's hair. I smiled brightly at her, and she perked up noticeably.

Walking into the plaza, I began announcing cheerfully, "Yaknog! Get your yaknog! Come on and get a delicious, frothy cup of cheer!" To be honest with myself, I hadn't really thought of what to call my beverage until just now. But yak milk was the main ingredient, so the name seemed kind of appropriate.

"Oh, hey guys!" I called out to the twins, Snaketail, and Snotlout. They were simply hanging around in the plaza, looking for something to do. When they turned, I excitedly went on, "Try this tasty new drink I made for the holidays!"

Tuffnut, for one, didn't take it well. "What's that smell?" he growled, screwing up his face in disgust. "Is that you?" he rudely asked his twin, pushing her to the ground.

"It's yaknog," I explained cheerily, pouring some into a cup. It came slopping out like thick, oddly colored mud. "Ugh, if I drink that I'm going to yak-nog all over the place," he said, taking several steps back.

I scowled at him. "Maybe you'd rather taste a punch to the face?" I asked menacingly. But before I could act on my threat, Snotlout volunteered, joined hesitantly by Snaketail. The former eagerly gulped it down, while the latter gingerly sipped a bit.

I beamed at the two of them. Snotlout paused a bit before swallowing and coughing, "You can really taste the yak." Snaketail had a far different reaction, puffing out her cheeks with a muffled burp and forcing the yaknog down with a loud swallow. "Ugh. I think I'm gonna yarp," she rasped.

Before I could ask what the Hel the word "yarp" meant (I suspected it wasn't exactly something delightful) when the sound of running feet drew my attention. It was Fishlegs.

"Mmm, what is that stuff?" he asked eagerly, and I for one was overjoyed to see someone showing this much enthusiasm towards my new invention. "Oh!" I replied, "It's my new traditional Snoggletog drink!"

If I had seen Snotlout slowly shaking his head at Fishlegs behind me, he would have been picking himself off the ground a week later. As it were, though, I didn't know why Fishlegs suddenly seemed reluctant. He managed to stutter, "Oh, um, I have a sudden, uh, and inexplicable

urge to, um, change my mind!"

I sighed in disappointment. "Well, you don't know what you're missing," I told him, starting off in the direction of Gobber's forge. "I'll bet Hiccup would like some."

The last thing I heard from them that morning was Ruffnut sneering at Snotlout, "Are you crying?" I grinned at that wonderful image, then continued my walk with a spring in my step.

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****Gobber's Forge (Hiccup's POV)****

For some reason â€" despite the sad fact that I had worked literally all night without getting so much as an ounce of sleep â€" I wasn't in the least bit tired. In fact, I was proud and a little excited, for my latest project was, in my opinion, my best yet.

I just finished putting away the tools at the back of the smithy when I heard Astrid calling my name. "Yep, I'm over here!" I called back, meeting her at the door. She was carrying a shield, upon which sat a mug filled withâ€¦ somethingâ€¦ and two cups.

"Here, happy holidays," she sang, holding out the platter. "From me to you." I grinned and said jokingly, "Thank you, my lady." I took a cup and swallowed a generous amount of drink â€" and immediately wished I hadn't.

Whatever had been in that cup was on the floor in seconds. I gagged, then stopped when I saw Astrid's hurt expression. "Um, I, uh, think that there's room for a little moreâ€¦ improvement," I hastily amended. Thankfully, she shrugged and smiled. "Yeah, I wasn't feeling too confident when I made this."

Putting down the shield, she took note of the result of my long and busy night, sitting on the table in front of me. "What's this?" she asked, full of enthusiasm.

I hesitated, then said seriously, "You're going to think this sounds crazy, but I couldn't stop thinking about what Tuffnut said last night." I glanced at her, and seeing the unasked question in her eyes, I went on.

"Toothless can't come and go like all the other dragons," I explained, "and that's, well, that's just not fair. "So, I was up all night, and I think I've finally found a way to fix that." With Astrid leaning over me, I quickly showed her how the new tail fin â€" for that was what it was â€" worked. I pulled on a small lever, and thanks to the complex structure of the new prosthetic, the fin automatically folded open.

"No way, you built him a brand-new tail?" Astrid asked in disbelieving amazement. "So he's going to be able to fly without you! Wow, what a great gift." I nodded and was about to say something else when a sad look crept into her eyes.

"What if he never comes back?" she murmured, and I stopped. I hadn't thought of that. Not once. I hung my head.

Astrid suddenly laughed. "What am I saying? Of course he will," she told me, taking my hands in hers in an encouraging gesture. I gave her a smile that didn't quite end up as wide as I had intended.

She became more serious. "Look, Hiccup," she said softly. "Toothless is your best friend. There's no way he'd abandon you likeâ€¦ well, like the other dragons did." After that statement, the silence became awkward.

I coughed, and Astrid let go with one of her hands, and squeezed mine with the other. "Well, I'm going to go spread some more holiday cheer! â€¦Or attempt to, anyway." I grinned and nodded.

Astrid quickly leaned forward and gave me a short but wonderful kiss on the lips, then ran out of the forge with her mug and shield.

"You're amazing!" she called back to me, and then disappeared around a corner.

Still a little stupefied after the kiss, I could do nothing but stare after her.

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****Hiccup's House****

Walking up the steps to my house, I could already see Toothless excitedly jumping up and down on the roof, with every intent of waking up the scrawny Viking he believed to be still asleep.

"Toothless!" I called up to him, with the new fin in hand. "Come down here, bud, I have something for you!" The Night Fury scampered down to my level and gave the bundle a curious sniff.

"Yep, check it out, huh?" I said as he nudged it. I walked around to the back of him, only to have him follow. "Toothless, settle down!" I laughed, hoping it didn't sound too flustered. "Sit still and let me get this on you!" After a bit more prompting, Toothless obligingly held still so I could take off our regular riding gear and apply the new tail fin.

Once I was done â€" I quickly double-checked to make sure the lever was aligned with his other fin â€" I stood up and allowed Toothless to move again. "You are going to love this," I said to him cheerfully.

Toothless took a look at the new fin positioned on his tail and waved it around experimentally. It seemed as if he didn't like the feeling, because he started whipping his tail all around, trying to get the prosthetic off. "Toothless, stop!" I called. "You don't need to" â€" suddenly, Toothless spread his real fin, and the fake fin mimicked it.

The Night Fury paused, completely shocked at this unexpected reaction. Curiously, he folded and opened his tail fin a few times, watching how the prosthetic moved with it. "There you go," I sighed, relieved that he was getting used to it. "See, what do you think?"

He turned to me, and I gave him an encouraging smile. I usually couldn't read his face on a normal day, but this was different. His pupils were slitted and his expression looked as if it were carved in stone. "Toothless?" I asked uncertainly, the smile slowly vanishing.

With a roar, Toothless leapt into the air and rose up and over the house, vanishing into the overcast sky before I could even blink.

Toothless is your best friend. There's no way he'd abandon you like well, like the other dragons did. Astrid's words came back to me, mockingly.

She had been wrong. A distant roar came from the spot where Toothless had left me – left me for his newfound freedom.

My heart shattered, and unlike last time, I felt it. Painfully.

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****Let us stop there for now.****

****We have so much to cover in the next chapter, and I can guarantee one or two more Hiccstrid scenes for you readers XD XD****

****Also, I'll be sure to explain more about Batwings' old life on Siren Island, because this is his first time participating in the dragon mating season.****

****R+R and see you all soon!****

21. A Snoggletog to Remember: Part II

****As I mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, we have a lot to go through in this one.****

****So I think I should stop stalling and get on with the show, hmm?****

****Matt: Yeah, Snaketail does seem a bit weird of a name in hindsight. I don't know why I thought of it, but it sticks in my mind now.****

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****Sky (Toothless' POV)****

I flew out over the ocean, feeling with delight the wind rushing past. For the first time in months, I was free, totally free. I could fly on my own, wherever and whenever I wanted. Sure, I couldn't turn as well as I used to, but nevertheless, the feeling of flying on my own again reminded me of the old days.

My mind wandered as I got used to this old yet new sensation. It finally rested on Hiccup. How had he reacted when I had left him so suddenly? I felt guilty about having abandoned him like that, but

there was nothing I could do about it now.

There was something I needed to do. Hiccup was probably thinking that I was going to join the other dragons. I snorted and thought, _As if._ Night Furies didn't breed communally like the majority of dragons. And anyway, I was the only Night Fury I knew of. Finally, there was no way that I would be going to join that Skrill's crew. Not on my life.

Hiccup had dropped that thing he had worn on his head yesterday into the sea. I didn't know why, but I knew that it was important to him, or he wouldn't have worn it.

Thus, I was off to search for it. I was going to bring the thing back to Hiccup.

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****Three Days Later****

I lay in bed, wide awake. Sleep wouldn't come, but that wasn't a surprise. I had lain awake all night, wondering where Toothless had gone and why. As it turned out, despite Astrid's belief, he had abandoned me. And here, I lay, waiting for him to come back.

My sadness was so complete I could even hear Toothless jumping up and down on the roof excitedly, right nowâ€|

I sat bolt upright. Had I or had I not heard that? I listened, and sure enough, there it was again. Dust fell from the roof as the building rattled. "Is thatâ€|" I breathed to myself.

The next time, there was no mistaking it. "Toothless!" I cried, throwing myself out of bed and rushing for the door. I hurried down the stairs, hastily putting on my vest as I did so, my feet pounding on the steps.

I threw open the door, and the cold yet calm air hit me like a fist. But I was too overjoyed to feel it. I ran around to the back of the house, exclaiming, "I knew you'd come ba" â€" but then I slipped on the same patch of ice that I had slipped on a few days ago. This time, though, I hit the ground hard, my head thudding painfully against the hard ice.

I fought to stay conscious as little colored sparkles danced around the edge of my vision. I got up slowly and shook my head to clear it. I stared up at the house and saw not Toothless, but my dad, hammering Snoggletog decorations onto the roof while he stood steadily on the top of a tall ladder. "Morning, son!" he called cheerfully. "Oh, morning, Dad," I muttered back, rubbing the back of my head and wincing.

"Glad you're up," he said, climbing down the ladder. "I was looking for your helmet. Odin needs a place to put your gifts," he added, and I froze. _My helmet!_ I cried inwardly. It had dropped into the ocean a few days ago, and what with Toothless leaving, I had completely forgotten about it. "Oh, right, my helmet," I said dryly. "I'd better get on that."

I started to walk down the hill into the village when I was stopped.

"Hold on," Stoick said, and I turned back toward him. "Come on, what's on your mind? Out with it." I sighed and replied, "It's been three days, Dad. I figured Toothless would have been back by now."

Stoick put a reassuring hand on my shoulder, and for once it didn't make me stumble. "I'm sure he's with the other dragons," he told me. "Yeah?" I responded sarcastically. "I wish I could be that sure."

My father sighed heavily and said sadly, "Look, I know what it's like to miss someone you love this time of year. What do we do when they're not here for the holiday? We celebrate them. And I'm sure that's what Toothless would want you to do."

I smiled, for once happy for the father-son lecture. "You're right," I told him, and he nodded and clapped me on the back. This time, I did stumble. "Now go get that helmet," Stoick said, climbing back onto the ladder, "there's been enough disappointment around here."

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****Berk Village****

There I was, carrying a pair of oars and heading down to the docks, when I bumped into Fishlegs. I had been planning on taking a boat down to where I lost my helmet and fishing for it (yeah, I hadn't really thought everything out). _Too bad Batwings or some other aquatic dragon isn't around, _I thought.

Fishlegs was holding in his hands a huge basket filled to the brim with fish. "Hungry, Fishlegs?" I laughed. "You have enough fish there to feed a dragon!" Instead of laughing with me, Fishlegs became flustered. "O-oh, a-a dragon? Th-that's crazy!"

He ran off just then, heading toward one of the barns. Narrowing my eyes, I followed him, keeping out of sight. _Just what is he up to?_ I asked myself.

Fishlegs entered the barn, closing the door behind him. He stayed in there for about a minute, and then exited, minus the basket of fish, shutting the door tightly and grinning to himself. I came out of hiding only when he had run off, doing some kind of dance that he tended to do when he was ecstatic about something.

Putting the oars down against the side of the barn, I yanked open the doors with all of my strength. The next thing I knew, a Gronckle was flying straight toward me, slamming into me and flying up over the village towards the sea.

My eyes were shut tight, and when I opened them, I saw that I was clutching onto the Gronckle's face. "Meatlug?!" I asked in disbelief, recognizing the dragon. She grunted and increased her speed, throwing up a cloud of dust and snow as she flew across the ground.

"Hiccup?!" I suddenly heard Astrid's voice. "Where are you going?" she called, and I called back, "I have no idea!"

And then Meatlug and I left the village behind

entirely.

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(Astrid's POV)

My friends and I were all gathered in the barn where Fishlegs had been secretly keeping Meatlug. Said boy was off in a corner, muttering in despair to himself. "I can't believe her," he said.

That last comment was what snapped me. "YOU can't believe HER?" I screamed, slugging him in the gut. "You kidnapped your dragon!" Wincing, Fishlegs rasped, "That's kind of a strong word. It makes it sound so mean."

The twins were rummaging through the straw that Fishlegs had used, presumably, for Meatlug's bed. "Uh, guys?" Tuffnut said over his shoulder.

I ignored him and punched Fishlegs again. "She left you the second she was unleashed!" I raged further, unable to believe that Fishlegs had done such a thing. "I'm 72% sure that she wanted to stay," he protested, and Snaketail kicked him in the shin, for once taking my side.

"GUYS!" Tuff yelled above the commotion, prompting the rest of us to come and look at what he had discovered in the straw.

There, sitting innocently in the straw, were ten or eleven blue, knobby, egg-shaped objects. _Could it be?_ I wondered, squinting at one as I picked it up and rolled it in my hands.

"Wow, Meatlug barfed up a pile of rocks," said Fishlegs quickly, apparently eager to get our attention away from the nest. "You are such an idiot," Ruff told him. "Those aren't rocks. Your dragon laid eggs!"

That sentence caused a realization to burst in my mind. "Hang on," I murmured, voice rising in excitement, "I bet that's why the dragons left us â€" to lay their eggs!"

Fishlegs piped up again, still trying to deny what we had discovered. "But boy dragons don't lay eggs," he said lamely. Snaketail looked at him as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Yeah, I hate to break it to you," she said sarcastically, "but Meatlug is a girl."

Another realization burst in my mind, this one much more exciting than the last. "OK, everyone's missing their dragons, right?" I asked, getting up and holding one of the eggs. "Oh, here it comes," Snotlout muttered.

I reached onto a shelf and pulled out a red bow, rapidly wrapping it around the egg. "It'll be another new Snoggletog tradition!" I finished, holding up the egg for all to see. Fishlegs and Ruffnut seemed to think it was a good idea, while the other three just stared at me blankly.

The rest of the day passed by in a flash as we snuck into houses and

hid the eggs inside every Viking's helmet. "Oh, this is going to be so good," I murmured to myself, an uncontrollable grin spreading across my face.

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****Hel's Gate (Hiccup's POV)****

After I had gotten over my shock at being carried off to Thor knows where by Meatlug, I had climbed up onto her back with some effort. She didn't seem to have minded, so focused was she on her goal.

"Meatlug, where are you taking me?" I asked for the umpteenth time. We were currently flying through the mists of Hel's Gate, the dragon nest, weaving through the maze of rock spires and shipwrecked Viking vessels.

After more than a few close calls, Meatlug finally soared straight upward, and I yelled in surprise at this maneuver. We broke through the mist and found ourselves above the clouds, with the sun shining cheerfully down on us.

We flew for about half an hour after that, past the volcano that poked up above the clouds. But suddenly, the clouds below us vanished, and I found myself staring down into the blue, blue water. In the middle of the blue vastness, I saw a huge, ring-shaped island, with a massive lake in the middle. My eyes widened as I saw an astonishing number of dragons flying circles around the island, shrieking and calling to one another.

Meatlug landed awkwardly, digging in with her claws as she skidded to a halt. I was thrown off of her back, and as I got up she lumbered contentedly away.

I looked around in complete awe at what I was seeing. Dragons of all shapes and sizes were clumped together in little groups, with each group sitting or standing around a bowl-shaped structure. And in each bowl there was a cluster of tiny, energetic, constantly chirping baby dragons.

"You come here to have babies," I murmured in amazement. The dragons hadn't left us for good â€" just to rear their young and have families!

I walked down to the edge of the lake. I trailed a hand through the water and was surprised to find that the water was pleasantly warm. A ways to my left, I noticed a Nadder feeding its chicks by vomiting up a fish. I grinned, reminded of how Toothless had done the same thing the day we met.

Suddenly, something else drew my attention. A Blundertail was nudging its massive eggs into what looked like a large tide pool. I curiously made my way over, almost stumbling over a pair of dragon hatchlings. I took one last glance at the playful pair, then watched the Blundertail roll its eggs into the water.

I peered in, seeing that the tide pool was far deeper than I had thought. When the eggs had reached the bottom, there was a muffled *boom* and a flash of orange light. A rush of bubbles broke the

surface, and then three little baby Blundertails scrambled out of the watery pit. The monstrous mother affectionately nuzzled its newborn, waist-height chicks, and I couldn't help but soften at the sight.

"Hey, you missed one!" I called to the Blundertail, walking over to an egg that lay forgotten beside the tide pool. I knelt next to the egg, which was bigger than a large chicken, and moved to push it into the water " when it started to shake, glowing cracks appearing on its surface. I knew what was about to happen, and shielded my face.

The egg smoldered and blasted apart in a great plume of flame, throwing me to the ground. I picked myself up painfully just in time to see the steaming Blundertail newborn open its eyes and stretch tiredly as if nothing had happened.

I'd seen Terrible Terror eggs hatch before in a similar manner " but then again, those dragons laid eggs whenever and wherever. Most Vikings were aware of the danger the highly volatile eggs presented.

At least the majority of the dragons come to this place to have kids, I thought in relief. "It's a good thing these don't hatch on Berk," I said to myself, in much the same tone.

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****Meanwhile" (Astrid's POV)****

I looked on excitedly as Ruffnut snuck into the house in front of us and placed the last of Meatlug's eggs inside. When she came out, she was almost as giddy as I was.

"Wasn't this a great idea?" I enthused. "Uh-huh!" squealed Fishlegs. "Everyone's going to be so surprised!"

All of a sudden, there was a huge burst of flame from inside the house, and debris shot in all directions. A piece of wood flew straight at Fishlegs, thumping him on the head and momentarily knocking him out. "Surprise!" jeered Snotlout.

A terrible realization wound its way into my heart. It trailed hopelessness and barely contained horror in its wake. _What have we " I " done?_ I thought, keeping even that thought to a whisper. _How could I have forgotten?_

"The eggs explode," breathed Snaketail in horror. As she said this, a baby Gronckle made its way into our midst and sat comfortably on the still-out-of-it Fishlegs. It gurgled and smiled at us.

Ruff, Tuff, and even Snotlout smoldered at the sight of the baby. Then came the inevitable.

All around us, houses started to combust. Vikings ran in terror, and the smoking masonry whistled loudly as it soared everywhere. "The eggs explode!" Snaketail repeated, voice rising to a high-pitched shriek.

By now, flames were spreading everywhere. Fiery debris flew unpredictably in all directions. Some hit the Snoggletog tree, setting it alight. "Whoa," murmured Tuffnut, marveling at the destruction. "Awesome!" agreed Ruffnut. "This was your best idea yet," Snotlout casually said to me.

This was all my fault. I shouldn't have been so stupid as to forget the danger dragon eggs presented. "What in Odin's name is going on?!" roared Stoick in both rage and despair.

Everyone turned to look at me, even my friends. "The eggs explode," I whispered, facepalming in exasperation.

There was one Hell of a mess to clean up.

And all the while, a small crowd of baby Gronckles eyed me innocently.

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****New Birth Island (Hiccup's POV)****

"Toothless!" I called repeatedly, listening for any answering call. All I got were the chirps and warbles of thousands of dragons and their new chicks as they went about their business. "Toothless, where are you?" I murmured to myself worriedly.

I came over a small ridge, and before me was revealed a small plateau. On it, several dragon families were resting, and, to my delighted surprise, I recognized some of them.

"Hookfang! Horrorcow! Stormfly!" I called out to the dragons, and they all raised their heads eagerly at the sound of my voice. The Monstrous Nightmare nudged me affectionately from his position at his own nest. Horrorcow actually got up, picked me up with her long tail, and lifted me into the air so she could nuzzle me.

"You have no idea how glad I am to see you!" I said happily. When the Gronkle put me down, I went to pat Stormfly on the head. She gurgled cheerily and pushed her nose against me.

From behind her, a trio of Nadder chicks scampered out, obviously curious at the sight of me. "And you have babies!" I enthused, bending down to scratch each one under the chin. The chicks chirped happily and took turns bumping my hand and climbing up on my knee.

I left my dragon friends to care for their families, walking along the coastline of the island, admiring the sunset. I had no idea where the time had went. It was so peaceful here, I felt as if I could stay forever.

Then, on a small islet that dribbled off the main coast, I caught sight of a familiar figure perched upon it. "Batwings!" I called, and the Siren started, clearly not expecting to hear my voice.

"Hiccup!" he called back, taking flight from his speck of rock and landing next to me. "How did you get here?" he asked me, observing me with his blue eyes sparkling. "Ah, it's a long story," I said sheepishly. "What about you? Don't you have a family to take care of?"

At this, Batwings' gaze became sad. "I don't know why I even came here," he despaired. "I should have known I'd be the only Siren here." I tilted my head to the side curiously. "What do you mean?" I asked gently.

He fluttered his wings, clearly in discomfort. "My home, Siren Island, is a very long way from the main islands," he began to explain, "Berk being one of them. Because all these islands are so close together, all the dragons from each island band together each year and come to New Birth Island." He swept his clawed hand around, gesturing to the island upon which we stood.

"But because Siren Island, and several islands besides, is so isolated, the dragon population there doesn't bother flying all that way, so they simply breed then and there. And because I'm the only Siren on Berk, I'm consequently alone here as well."

I smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, I'm sure if you ever get back to Siren Island, you'll be able to join in the breeding season there," I reassured him. He didn't seem very reassured.

"We Sirens are very picky," he said, giving me a half-smile. "It all has to do with our intuitions. When we feel another Siren would be a suitable partner, we stick together for life and never leave."

This time, I laughed. "Batwings," I told him, "I'm the best guy to tell you, there's someone out there for everyone. And you never know when and where you'll find her." The Siren smiled gratefully, showing his fangs in a grin.

"Now, enough depressing talk," I said, turning back to the countless scores of dragons and their babies. "Who knew that you all left to celebrate your own kind of holiday," I said idly, and Batwings nodded in agreement.

"Now I guess I'd better get back to mine," I said decisively. "You mind giving me a lift back home?" Batwings grinned again and shapeshifted into his eel form, bending down and allowing me to climb up onto his neck. As I tightly clutched the Siren's slippery neck, he leapt into the air and beat his wings strongly, if something with no legs could be described as having leapt.

"I'll see you all back on Berk when you're good and ready," I yelled down to the rest of the dragons. Stormfly squawked back at me, then took off as well, calling to the other dragons. Soon, dragons all over the island were taking to the skies.

"Oh no, I think I just started the return migration," I muttered exasperatedly. "Well, if you insist!" I urged Batwings to the front of the group, and the other adult dragons fell into flight behind him, urging their babies to follow.

As one, the dragon chicks ran after their parents, heading for the cliffs on one side of the island. Most of them stopped, but there were five who didn't. They jumped, madly fluttering their wings. They seemed to be getting the hang of it when a gust of wind blew them right back.

"OK, this isn't going to work," I muttered, then for some reason, I

got an epiphany. Instantly, I knew that it was the perfect solution. "Everyone, hang on and wait for us! I've got an idea!" I patted Batwings' neck, and we took flight alone, heading for Hel's Gate.

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****Berk Village (Astrid's POV)****

For the past six hours, everyone was hard at work rebuilding their homes. No one worked harder than me or my friends â€" this was our fault, and we were determined to right our wrong.

I glanced down from my vantage on one of the roofs and saw the dozen-odd Gronckle chicks relaxing in a cozy nook off to the side. I couldn't help but be irritated by their carefree attitudes.

"Ah, it ain't so bad," I heard Gobber say, and I looked down once more to see him and Stoick walk into view. "What do you mean, not so bad?" Stoick huffed. "The village is destroyed and the dragons have left us. Let's face it, this holiday is a complete â€" what are these people looking at?" he added, frustrated and pushing people aside to get a better look.

I followed their gaze curiously until I saw something that totally shocked me. Part of the night sky was moving! No, wait â€" it was something silhouetted against the night sky, flapping its thousand wings and slowly descending with something dangling from its tentacles.

Wait just a minute, I thought, peering closer. It wasn't one creature with many wings and tentacles â€" it was many, and they were dragons! They all held ropes, which were attached to a huge, torn Viking boat that hung below them!

"It's Hiccup!" someone yelled, and almost instantly, I spotted him riding a familiar, eel-like beast. My heart swelled with relief and joy. "And our dragons!" I breathed, dropping my tool and scrambling down the ladder.

Gently, the dragons lowered the boat to the ground, and when it had stopped moving, they let go of the ropes and landed in the midst of the crowd. Then I was able to observe the happiest sight of my life â€" Vikings everywhere, embracing their dragon companions in welcome.

But what's in the boat? I wondered, and then I saw â€" hundreds upon hundreds of little dragon chicks, nervously poking their heads out from the gaps in the boat's hull. Growing bolder, they all scrambled down and began exploring the new landscape, and the new people that stared down upon them with soft expressions on their faces.

Snotlout tore ahead of the rest to hug Hookfang. The twins ecstatically greeted Barf and Belch. Meatlug joined the chicks already in the village, only to be tackled gleefully by Fishlegs. I looked around excitedly, only to find Stormfly making her way right toward me, with three little Nadder babies in tow.

"To the Great Hall!" Stoick called, and was met by a cheer from the

rest of the people. "Grab your dragons! We finally have something to celebrate!"

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****Great Hall (Hiccup's POV)****

At least the Great Hall hadn't been damaged during whatever had happened to the rest of the village during my absence. There were so many lanterns strung from the rafters that it no longer had that gloomy atmosphere about it. Rather, everything about it felt so much more cheerful.

I couldn't really find anything I wanted to do, so I contented myself with watching everyone celebrating with their dragons. The Great Hall seemed larger with all the light illuminating everyone and everything within.

I passed Fishlegs at one of the benches, exclaiming "This is the best holiday ever!" He was cuddling two of Meatlug's hatchlings while the Gronckle herself curled up on the floor with the others.

Music was playing, and a large space on the floor had been cleared for dancing. As I passed, I witnessed several Vikings doing just that, laughing uproariously and just having a good time. At the same time, I saw Snaketail, eyes darting around as if she was looking for someone. Suddenly, I realized who she was looking for and ducked back into the crowd before she could find that person.

I moved to another part of the crowd and peeked back through. I saw several of my friends there – Batwings and Nightshade were doing a sort of dancing flight above the crowd, serpentine forms winding over and around each other splendidly. Ruff and Snotlout were dancing, although neither looked particularly happy about it. Grinning, I glanced back toward Snaketail and my eyes widened. She was shuffling her feet nervously and talking to Tuffnut. He spoke back, and although I couldn't hear his response, I could tell what he had said by Snaketail's delighted expression. My grin shrank down into a contented smile as I saw her lead him onto the dance floor.

Still smiling, I turned away and walked back through the crowd, where the little boys and girls were playing with some of the dragon chicks. I noticed that Astrid's sister wasn't among them, so I curiously glanced around in hopes of finding her.

Then I saw her, and my eyes popped open in shock. The ten-year old was staring up into the rafters with a large cod in her hands. Up there, right where she was staring, was a huge Skrill. I recognized it as the one that had chased Toothless and I some time ago. The beast, hesitating at first, crawled down a pillar to Arachne's height and took the fish. She patted its snout, and her shoulder-length hair stood up slightly with static electricity.

I couldn't help but wonder – would Arachne eventually become the Skrill's rider? I made a mental note to observe the two of them more later.

Somehow, thinking about the Skrill made me start thinking about the day we had met, then I couldn't help thinking in turn about how I had lost my helmet. Then I began thinking about how Toothless had wanted

to get it, and my thoughts inevitably turned to Toothless. Where was he? Where had he gone, if not with the other dragons?

I leaned up against a pillar and sighed. Suddenly, Astrid was there, taking my hand in hers. "I know this must be really hard for you," she said quietly, "seeing everyone with their dragons. But you did a great thing for all of us."

I just smiled and sheepishly tapped my metal leg on the ground. "Thank you," she said, then leaned forward and kissed me. My anxiety simply melted away as I kissed her back, putting my hand against her cheek. She responded by wrapping her arms around my neck and deepening the kiss. I gently pushed her against the pillar and pushed my lips more firmly against hers, and she replied in kind.

We separated after several long seconds of this bliss. Astrid immediately pulled me into a tight hug, which I returned half-heartedly. "Astrid," I asked, "where did Toothless go?" I felt her shake her head slightly. "I don't know," she murmured in response.

Then she let go and grinned mischievously. "I wouldn't want to be you right now," she teased. "You brought back everyone's dragons except your own." Even though I realized she was probably saying that to make up for the romantic situation we had just been caught up in, I was still hurt.

As I gave her an icy glare, her grin became genuine and she forcefully turned me around. Initially, I stumbled and re-adjusted my vest. Then I saw what she wanted me to see â€" a pitch-black dragon was bounding across the floor toward me!

"Toothless!" I cried happily, for indeed it was him. He stopped right in front of me with a cheerful warble. I couldn't help myself â€" I wrapped my arms around his scaly neck and embraced him gratefully.

I felt the Night Fury tense, then relax as he gently raised a paw and placed it on my back. Feeling his claws scrape slightly across my back thrilled me to no end. I hoped the moment would last forever.

Then I got a hold of myself and looked Toothless in the eye. "Bad dragon! Very bad dragon!" I scolded him, raising a finger. "You scared me half to death, don't you ever fly off for that long without me again, and oh gods, what do you have in your mouth?" I added exasperatedly â€" indeed, as Toothless had followed the movement of my finger, I had noticed something long and curved extending out of his mouth.

Before I had a chance to react, Toothless had bent over me and placed my head in his mouth. I heard my friends' exclamations of disgust as they looked on. I was about to exclaim as well when I felt the object fit snugly over my head.

Toothless withdrew, an expression of satisfaction on his muzzle. I reached up and felt the hard, metallic, and slimy thing sitting on my head. "Yeah, you found my helmet alright," I told Toothless sheepishly â€"

And then stopped as realization flooded me. I reached up again, and

sure enough, my helmet was sitting on my head again! "My helmet!" I exclaimed excitedly. "That's where you've been?" I embraced my best friend once again, and when I let go, he vomited a half-eaten fish into my hands and stared at me pointedly.

I laughed, taking a bite out of the fish without a complaint. "Happy Snoggletog, ev'ryone!" Gobber called out, and was met by our cheers. I made sure to cheer the loudest.

-.-.-.-.-

****Hiccup's House****

I had fallen fast asleep for the first time in days. My friends and I had stayed at the Great Hall until well after midnight, celebrating and having the time of our lives. I smiled at the fond memories â€" being with Astrid, watching Snaketail and Tuffnut dance, and laughing as Ruff dared Snotlout to stuff as many raw mackerel as he could into his mouth. I smiled again and chuckled to myself.

Batwings was still asleep, snoring softly on his usual perch right above my head. But suddenly the house shook and a muffled gurgle came from above. I grinned and thought, *Right on schedule.* The roof shuddered multiple times, abruptly waking Batwings up.

"Ugh," he said tiredly, stretching his wings and adjusting his shirt. "Can't you train that out of him or something?" Not waiting for a reply, Batwings flew out of the house, muttering to himself all the while.

I yawned and grinned again, before making my way outside. I didn't bring my helmet this time, because there was no way I was losing it again. Not after what had happened last time I lost it.

Standing beside the door, I looked out at the quiet village. Fresh snow covered everything, and I could see Batwings fading into the distance as he headed for the highest point on the island, presumably to continue his sleep in Nightshade's burrow just underneath Mildew's house. Everyone knew that Nightshade slept there, except Mildew of course. The running joke on Berk was that one day she'd accidentally burrow up through his floor and end up literally scaring him to death. Privately, I had my fingers crossed, although I doubted I was the only one.

"Coming, Toothless!" I called in response to an urgent warble. I walked around to the side of the house and, to my astonishment, saw Toothless sitting there with our old riding gear out in front of him.

"Toothless, what did you pull this out for?" I asked, amused. "We don't need this anymore. Now, come on, let's" â€" I couldn't finish my statement, as Toothless shied away from me and sat back down, gesturing to the saddle and fin lying in the snow.

"Would you quit fooling around? You have your new tail now!" I told him, trying to get onto his back again. He avoided me, walked around to the other side of the gear in front of me, and crouched as if to sit down again.

I began to suspect what he was trying to tell me. "Toothless?" I said

with a slight smile. The Night Fury extended his tail and flexed his fin, causing the other one to stretch out with it. Then, to my horror, he began pounding his tail on the ground as if trying to squash a particularly disgusting insect.

"What are you doing?!" I cried, throwing my arms out for him to stop. He didn't stop until the fin's mechanism was completely broken, then he snapped his tail with such force that the entire fin flew off the cliff behind my house and out of sight.

Toothless sheepishly pushed the saddle forward again. Finally, I realized what he wanted â€" he wanted us to fly together again. He liked it more when I was guiding him and his fake tail fin.

I couldn't help it â€" a slow, amazed smile spread across my face.

The Night Fury grinned toothlessly back.

-.--.-.-.

Winter on Berk lasts most of the year. It hangs on with both hands and won't let go. And the only real comforts against the cold are the ones you keep close to your heart.

Turns out that was the best Snoggletog ever. That year, I gave my best friend a pretty great gift.

â€| He gave me a better one.

-.--.-.-.

You like what I called the island? "New Birth Island" has a nice ring to it, don't you agree?

I also decided that it was time to slowly start drawing Snaketail's affections away from Hiccup, because I'm getting a little tired of the love octagon or whatever it is now (it isn't a triangle anymore, that's for sure).

Also, do you readers want Arachne and the Skrill to join up with Hiccup's group on their adventures? It's entirely up to you on this, I can just as easily make them fade into the background.

So, please review, and I'll see you very soon for the next chapter!

Ferdoos: There, now you know where Nightshade sleeps.

22. In Dragons We Trust

Not one of my favorite episodes, except for what happens at the beginning XD

Then again, this episode is important to the storyline as a whole, so I'm pretty much forced to include it.

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As you fly through life, it's always good to know who you can trust and who you can't.

I know I can always count on Toothless. And it's important for him to know that, no matter what, he can count on me.

-.--.-.-.

****Sky Over Berk****

"It's your turn, Fishlegs. Jump," I said to my friend as we all flew across the sky on our dragons. As leader of the BerkDragonAcademy, I had scheduled a lesson that I liked to call "trust exercises". Basically, the idea was that you would jump off of your dragon, and you would have to trust the dragon to catch you before you hit the water.

So far, Snaketail, Astrid, the twins, and I had all taken our turns. Fishlegs, although he had seen each of us, one after the other, jump off and be caught flawlessly, was still reluctant.

"I don't want to jump!" said Fishlegs. "It's a trust exercise," I explained for what felt like the billionth time in a row. "You have to trust that Meatlug will catch you."

Fishlegs, for once, put his foot down. "I like to do my trusting with my feet on the ground, thank you very much," he huffed. Snotlout cruised up beside him and sneered, "Like this, _Chicken_-legs. WAAAAA-HOOOOO!" He lifted both arms and simply slid off of Hookfang's neck, his yell growing fainter and fainter to our ears.

Hilariously, Hookfang kept flying straight ahead, completely oblivious to his rider's absence.

"Uh, should we mention something to Hookfang?" Tuffnut asked. "Let me sleep on it," Ruffnut smirked. "Hookfang, get him!" called Astrid, and the Nightmare looked at her in confusion. Toothless roared at him, and after a second, he looked down and caught sight of the plummeting Snotlout.

With a shriek, Hookfang folded his wings and streaked after Snotlout. "Not feeling the trust!" Snotlout cried as he fell toward a hard and unforgiving destination â€" namely, the ground.

Hookfang barely caught Snotlout, snagging the boy's shirt on the tip of his horn. With his rider rescued, the Monstrous Nightmare flared his wings, but it was too late to stop. The two of them crashed through a house.

Mildew's house.

I facepalmed while the twins snickered. "He's dead," commented Snaketail, unconcerned.

Suddenly, I felt Toothless tense up and growl under his breath. He turned his head to look at something in the distance, and the growl intensified. I followed his gaze and stiffened.

A Skrill, the same Skrill that had attacked us just before Snoggletog, was flying toward us. It wasn't roaring in for an attack,

instead flapping lazily as if out for an idle afternoon flight. None of us said anything as it fell into our flight formation, shooting Toothless a death glare.

I heard Astrid's loud gasp, and then I saw why she had done so. Sitting on the Skrill's back was her ten-year old sister Arachne! "Hey guys," she said cheerfully, waving at us.

Astrid's mouth opened and closed like a fish's. I asked the question I knew everyone was thinking. "What are you doing here?" I asked. Then I thought about it and asked another question. "And why are you on the back of a Skrill?"

She grinned and replied, "I met this dragon a few weeks ago, and I kind of liked her. So I decided to get to know her a little more, and we bonded like you and all your dragons did. And so, here I am." Arachne spread her arms, indicating the sky in which we flew.

"Did you name her?" asked Astrid, surprisingly well met with the idea of her little sister riding a dragon. "Yep!" Arachne sang cheerfully. "Her name's Rilebolt. The 'bolt' part's obvious, but the 'rile' part comes from the fact" â€

Suddenly, Toothless couldn't contain his hatred of the Skrill any longer and shot a fire blast her way. Rilebolt gave a wail that grated on our ears before ruthlessly tackling Toothless, almost knocking us out of the air.

Arachne managed to get Rilebolt under control before she struck at Toothless again. "â€| you shouldn't rile her up," she finished, giving her dragon a frustrated look. Rilebolt chirped innocently and exchanged fiery glares with Toothless.

Then the silence was broken by the sound of Hookfang flying back up into the sky with Snotlout safely on his back. "You'll pay for this!" came Mildew's yell from far below.

"Something tells me we're going to be hearing about this," I muttered, leading my friends to another part of the island.

-.-.-.-.-

****Hiccup's House****

My dad didn't look happy when he got home that night. He didn't usually look happy after a full day of "chiefing", but he looked particularly upset this time around.

Batwings and I were having our dinner â€" two chicken legs for me and a pile of clams for the Siren â€" when Stoick sat down at the table with us. Ignoring Batwings completely, he slammed a flat, broken piece of wood down on the table and glared at me.

"Shingle again?" I asked sarcastically. "Didn't we have roofing material for dinner last night?" Batwings laughed and piled on with mock enthusiasm, "Mmm, I'm not complaining at all."

Stoick intensified his glare. "It was an accident, Dad," I said, dropping my sarcastic act. "I'm sure Mildew's making it sound worse

than it actually is." Stoick replied, "A dragon and a huge, obnoxious boy crashed through his roof."

Batwings arched an eyebrow. "I'm going to go out on a limb and say it was Snotlout," he said. I raised my own eyebrows. "How'd you guess that?" I asked him, surprised.

The Siren pretended to think, "Hmm, let's see. Besides me, there are three other boys you hang out with. Fishlegs is huge but not obnoxious, Tuffnut is obnoxious but not huge" and Snotlout's like a 50-50 mix of the two." I saw his point, but before I could comment on that, Stoick got me back on track.

"Of all the houses to crash through," he said seriously, "Snotlout had to crash into Mildew's. You know he hates dragons more than anyone else!"

Batwings winced. "That crash must have scared poor Nightshade something fierce," he said in a strained voice. "She was taking her afternoon nap. I'll go find another place for her to roost" With that, he flew out the door and was gone, already calling out for Nightshade.

"Look Hiccup," Stoick said after a moment. "I gave you the responsibility of training those dragons. Everyone knows that! All eyes are upon you, son. Whatever those beasts do reflects on you, and whatever you do reflects on me!"

I sighed. "You're right, dad. I'm sorry," I apologized, getting up from the table and leaving my dinner. Before I left, my father finished, "You and your friends are going to go back to Mildew's and fix that roof. Without your dragons."

Again, I sighed. I probably could have gotten off worse than that. "Got a break there, bud," I said to Toothless, who walked over with his eyes silently pleading for a scratch on the chin. I never had the heart to turn him down when he gave me that look.

"Not so fast," Stoick said just as I was about to leave. "Aren't you forgetting something? It's Boot Night, they need to be aired out." He took off his boots and gave them to me, giving a little exclamation of disgust.

"Ugh!" I said, pinching my nose and holding the disgusting footwear at arm's length. "It's gonna take a lot more than air if you ask me," I muttered, stumbling outside and trying to breathe through my mouth.

All over the village, Vikings were walking outdoors with their boots and retching in a similar fashion. "I hate Boot Night," moaned Fishlegs, throwing the boots out in front of the house.

The twins were shoving their parents' boots in each others' faces, undergoing one of their usual fights. "Why is his left foot always so much smellier than his right?" asked Tuffnut with a disgusted grunt, with Ruffnut smirking at him as she held the boot in question to his nose.

Snaketail, who stayed at Astrid's place, had a clothespin on her nose as she grimaced, throwing out at least four pairs of boots. Chances

are, she's on the losing end of a bet with Astrid again,_ I thought with a smile.

Snotlout muttered, "Oh no," as he took an involuntary sniff and turned green, puffing out his cheeks and gagging.

Eager to get away from the putrid boots, everyone was inside in two cracks of a Grapple Grounder's tail. Thus, there was no one to see an unknown creature sneak into the village, on the prowl for a mealâ€|

-.--.-.-.

****Morning**** ****(Batwings' POV)****

When I had got back to the house last night, Hiccup had told me to get Stoick's boots in the morning. Then he had fallen asleep without another word.

So, when I woke up this morning, I stretched and exercised my wings as usual, then stalked outside to grab the (hopefully) aired-out boots. I looked down â€" and there wasn't anything there.

I was confused, and even more so when Stoick, Gobber, Mulch, and Bucket all arrived, barefooted. "Where are my boots?" demanded Stoick, stepping outside and forcing me onto the porch.

"They've all been stolen, ev'ry last one," growled Gobber. "Oh, so that's why me feet are so cold," said Bucket. "Who could have done such a thing?" Mulch asked, bewildered.

That was when Mildew arrived. "All I know is that they left a mighty big footprint," he said menacingly, pointing with his staff to a set of tracks in the snow.

Hiccup and his friends joined the fray. Luckily, all of them had a spare set of boots, so their feet wouldn't freeze and fall off. "Oh, these are Zippleback tracks!" said Fishlegs. "You can tell by the half-moon shaped arches â€" but that's Dragon 101, guys, I don't need to fill you in on _that_." He chuckled confidently.

"So a dragon walked through the village," I said, unconvinced. "A Zippleback, according to my friend Fishlegs," Hiccup continued for me. "But that doesn't mean he took everyone's boots."

Mildew looked smug. "Well, there's only one way to find out for sure â€" just follow the footprints."

Everyone did just that, with Stoick, Gobber, and Mildew in the lead. The trail of footprints stopped at the arena, where indeed, a Zippleback snoozed contentedly next to a pile of mangled footwear.

"So it's a pile of boots next to a Zippleback!" Hiccup said lamely. "That doesn't prove" â€" Stoick wordlessly held up a boot. It had been ripped and torn until it didn't even look like a boot anymore. "OK, he took the boots," Hiccup sighed.

"How are we supposed to do any work in this weather without our boots?" demanded a Viking. "This is outrageous!" called another, and

soon there was an uproar. "How much more of this can we stand from these dragons?" demanded Mildew, and was met with shouts of agreement.

When the crowd had quietened, Gobber walked up, shaking his head. "Listen to yerselves," he muttered, voice dripping with disdain. "'My feet are cold!' Yeh're Vikings â€" everythin's cold! I'll fix yer boots for yeh. Yeh'll be back to work in no time."

Stoick stepped up and took charge. "You heard Gobber," he said commandingly. "You'll all be getting your boots back, good as new." Mildew was predictably aghast, protesting, "That's it?! No consequences for these dragons?"

He wisely stopped talking when Stoick took an intimidating step toward him. "They took our boots, Mildew," he growled. "I don't think it's the end of the world."

The old man growled back and stormed away. But something about his footstepsâ€| wasn't the way it should have been. They sounded off, somehow. This realization made me glance at his feet and narrow my eyes. Mildew needn't have worried â€" his boots hadn't been taken. Indeed, they were on his feet as usual.

Hmmâ€| I thought. Something wasn't right here.

Then my attention was diverted as the Zippleback suddenly woke and stomped off, making a nice, deep footprint in a patch of snow. My eyes narrowed further. I could clearly see the difference between the fresh print and the older one beside it â€" the older one was much shallower.

Something definitely isn't right, I thought. _I need to tell this to Hiccup and the others. Maybe we can figure something out._

-.--.-.-.

****Berk Village (Hiccup's POV)****

There we were, in our usual hang-out atop the old catapult tower. Batwings had just told us about what he had noticed that morning in the arena, and I had to say it was a little bit suspicious. I had told everyone I'd try to come up with a solution as to why these suspicious things had been noticed, and they believed me. Then again, half of my friends weren't intelligent enough to comprehend the magnitude of the situation.

"We're going on night patrol," I informed them, suddenly and decisively. "Night patrol? I love it!" Tuffnut jumped in excitedly, then sobered quickly. "What is it?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes and gave them the simplest explanation I could think of. "It's where we patrol the village. At night. To keep an eye on the dragons and make sure they don't get blamed for anything else."

Fishlegs was looking hesitant. "Have you cleared this with our parents?" he blurted. "Because some of us aren't allowed out after a certain hour." Snotlout sneered at him, "Not allowed, or afraid?"

Fishlegs turned to him and said with wide, desperate eyes, "Hey, _things_ happen at night."

I took a breath through my nose and let it out slowly. "Guys, we have to do this!" I told them. "You didn't even have to hear Mildew â€" he wants our dragons, every dragon, banished."

Ruffnut thought about it, then nodded. "Permission to shoot first and ask questions later," she said, raising her hand. "Permission to skip the question," Tuff piled on, earning a smile of approval from his sister.

"We're just patrolling," said Snaketail calmly. "No one is shooting anything." Tuff scowled and said, "Here's a question â€" _where's the fun in that_?"

Astrid, who had yet to say anything, spoke up. "It's not supposed to be fun," she said, and just as I was about to thank her, added, "It _is_ a Hiccup idea." I glanced at her and protested, "What's that supposed to mean?"

She just smirked knowingly and said no more.

-.--.-.-.

****Berk Village, Several Hours Later****

All of us stayed up in the village while everyone else fell asleep. We had all agreed to patrol Berk, and the village in particular, to monitor the other dragons and make sure that they didn't get themselves into any more trouble.

Of course, we had our own dragons with us at all times, and more than once their sharp eyes and ears had helped us keep track of the other dragons. Astrid and Snotlout were also parading around with sashes around their waists â€" Astrid's idea was to come up with a society called the Dragon United Monitoring Brigade that would help keep the village safe from "any dragon-related problems". I chose not to point out the obvious fact that the acronym was dumb â€" literally.

Snotlout and I were walking through the village with lanterns in each of our hands and Hookfang and Toothless dutifully following, helping us keep watch. While Toothless and I checked an alleyway for dragons, Snotlout suddenly called out, "Who goes there?!"

I turned back to see Gobber step out of his forge. "Take a wild guess," he said sarcastically. Instead of moving on, Snotlout grew annoyed. "I don't think I like your attitude," he said threateningly, and Gobber merely replied, "Right back at ya."

Completely ignoring us, and indeed Hookfang as he wandered off in boredom, Snotlout said smugly, "Yeah, but I'm the one with the sash."

Gobber snorted and growled, "Let's take a closer look at that," snagging it on his hook and hoisting it, and Snotlout, up to his face. "'Dumb'," he read. "Suits you."

I rolled my eyes and boarded Toothless, deciding to make one last

patrol over the village before we turned in for the night. As we soared around Berk, I relaxed as I saw that everything was just as we had seen it all throughout the night â€" dragons sleeping, slumbering, snoring, and just plain out of it.

"Well, Mildew will be happy when he learns what dragons do at night," I muttered to myself. "They sleep like everyone else."

Satisfied, I gathered the others and told them that all was well in the village. "We did a good job for tonight," noted Batwings. "Yep," I responded. "Now we should all get some rest while there's still time."

Everyone left for their own houses. Motioning for Batwings to step inside, I took a short pause to have one last look at the village. It was still peaceful. I walked inside, shutting the door behind me, and tiptoed past my sleeping father and up the stairs.

-.--.-.-.

****Great Hall (No POV)****

The winter wind threw the Great Hall's doors open. All was silent for a few seconds, and then a fearsome claw appeared on the door, scoring long scrapes in the wood.

The creature, hidden under cover of night, advanced into the Great Hall. It underwent a silent rampage, clawing and slashing at whatever caught its eye. Benches were damaged, banners were torn, and the pillars were deeply scarred.

None of the food was taken, so if anyone had been present to watch the creature, they would have seen the motive of its rampage â€" nothing but the need to destroy.

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****I love cliffhangers, if you haven't figured that out yet.****

****Stay tuned for the next chapter, readers!****

23. Mildew's Triumph

****I think we all can figure out that a triumph for Mildew is bad for everyone else.****

****Matt: I'm sorry. Your reviews didn't come to my attention until later, so I didn't get them immediately.****

****I like your ideas, but I'm not planning on doing anything like them. But you're right about one thingâ€" Batwings eventually gets a girlfriendâ€"****

-.--.-.-.

****(Hiccup's POV)****

When my friends and I stepped into the Great Hall that morning, we was

completely, totally shocked. Almost every surface had been marred by fearsome claw marks that left ugly gashes behind. I winced visibly at the sight.

We walked around, observing the damage. Fishlegs was muttering to himself and Batwings seemed unconcerned, Astrid was distraught, and the twins were looking around in awe at all the damage.

"Who â€" or what â€" could have done such a thing?" asked my father, and surprisingly, he wasn't mad. Just confused and exasperated. That was a good sign in my book.

"Looks like a dragon!" Fishlegs eagerly and instantly replied. "We don't know that for sure, _Fishlegs_," I said, hinting heavily that he should keep quiet.

But he didn't get the hint. "Uh, sure we do," he said, turning back to the biggest set of scars. "Look at these claw marks â€" it was obviously a Monstrous Nightmare. The spacing of the talons is dead-on and" â€"

"Once again," I interrupted tiredly, "_thank you_, Fishlegs." He just muttered to himself sheepishly and blushed, unaware of my sarcasm. "But how could this happen?" Astrid said worriedly. "We had every dragon accounted for at all times! Right, Snotlout?"

I got a vague feeling of unease when I observed Snotlout looking fidgety. "When you say 'every dragon' and 'at all times', what exactly does that mean?"

I facepalmed. "Okay," I murmured, trying not to lose it, "what happened, Snotlout?"

He shook off his nervousness and drew himself up in what I guessed was supposed to be a dignified manner. "Well, I was detaining a suspect" â€" Snotlout's voice became patronizing as he glared pointedly at Gobber â€" "who didn't show sufficient respect to the sash."

Gobber glared right back and replied, "I think I showed sufficient respect to a sash that says 'dumb'." Astrid sighed and said to herself, "We've really got to change that name." Batwings mocked, "Needless to say."

Snotlout forged ahead, "Anyway, while I was questioning said suspect" â€" he glanced at Gobber again â€" "Hookfang may â€" and I'm not saying he did! â€" but it is possible that he wandered off for a fewâ€| hours."

There was a string of mutters from the Vikings listening. "Whoa, that's way longer than minutes," Tuffnut said dazedly.

There was a sudden noise of the Great Hall's doors opening noisily. And who should walk in just then to make the situation _infinitely_ worse but Mildew. "Oh no, the rumors are true," he said in shock. "The Great Hall. So many memories â€" my three weddings, _their_ three funerals. Oh, the funeralsâ€|"

He sighed dramatically and Gobber turned to us. "The dragon musta gone on a rampage," he said seriously. "I hate ta say it, Stoick, but

yeh're gonna hafta" â€" Stoick interrupted him. "I know what has to be done, Gobber." He turned to me and continued grimly, "Starting tonight, and continuing every night, I want every dragon on Berk under lock and key."

Predictably, Mildew wasn't happy. "What? That's it?! Look what they did!" Batwings cut him off and protested, "But this just doesn't make any sense! One of us wouldn't come in here and randomly destroy the place! None of the food was even touched!"

Stoick silenced him with a look. "I don't know why you do what you do," he said to him, "but I can't let you do any more damage." With that, him, Gobber, and Mildew all walked out of the Great Hall.

-.-.-.-.-

****Berk Village (Stoick's POV)****

Gobber and I left the other Vikings to repair the Great Hall. As we walked through the village, I caught sight of Hiccup and his dragons flying off toward the arena.

"Ya had to cage the dragons, Stoick," Gobber said lowly. "Yeh had no choice!"

I sighed and responded sadly, "I know. But to Hiccup, when I punish them, I'm punishing him."

He said with a hint of affection, "Yeah, tha' boy thinks the dragons can do no wrong." I looked back up into the sky to see the retreating figures of Hiccup and his friends, and gave my reply. "I just hope he understands that while a father does what's best for his son, a chief must do what's best for the village."

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****Arena (Hiccup's POV)****

We all flew to the Berk Dragon Academy and dismounted our dragons once inside. Batwings had left on and came back from a mission to inform all of the other dragons that they would have to sleep in and around the Academy.

I stood next to Toothless as I watched the sun slowly go down over the ocean. Fishlegs was singing a soft song to Meatlug in order to soothe her anxiety, but the Gronckle just turned away miserably. "That usually works," he said, appalled. "Her whole bedtime routine is upset! She won't even lick my feet, thanks to" â€"

Snotlout slashed through his rant with a wave of his hand. "Watch it, Fishlegs. At least my dragon doesn't need a lullaby and a blankie," he taunted.

"Actually, it's your fault all our dragons have to sleep in jail," fumed Ruff. Tuff uncharacteristically agreed, growling, "Yeah, you don't see our dragon going on a rampage and wrecking stuff!"

As he was saying this, Hookfang had apparently said something offensive to Barf and Belch, who retaliated by hissing and flapping

their wings threateningly. Meanwhile, their foot accidentally flattened a boot with a loud crunching noise.

"Well, any good stuff," Tuff added. I saw Batwings' eyes narrow â€" obviously, he was thinking, just as I was, that boots didn't crunch.

"Hey, what's a boot doing in the middle of the arena?" Arachne asked, coming over from trying to comfort Rilebolt (who was hanging upside-down from the wire net above the arena and snarling at Toothless again).

"Oh, Gobber probably missed this one when he promised to fix the rest of them," Fishlegs said, bending down to pick the item up. But when he did, a shattered fishbone tumbled out of a rip in its heel, the pieces scattering all over.

"That's weird," I murmured, eyes riveted on the broken skeleton. Batwings picked up a piece of the skull and sniffed it. "It smells like a trout," he said, somewhat doubtfully. "That's the Hideous Zippleback's favorite food." Barf and Belch growled together in agreement. Nightshade slithered over and plowed her jaws into the ground, grinding up the skeleton (as well as some of the stone) happily.

"And there was a Zippleback in the arena next to the pile of boots that it stole," Astrid mused. "You know, I don't think a dragon stole the boots or wrecked the Great Hall," I said, to which Astrid grew skeptical. "None of us wants to believe it either," she said, "but you saw the proof."

I turned to her, a new urgency entering my voice. "What proof?" I challenged. "You saw the footprints too â€" they were supposed to have been made by a Zippleback, but Batwings told us that they were no deeper than mine!"

Fishlegs raised a hand. "There are several possible reasons that a dragon would make shallow footprints," he said. "Like, duh, he was trying to be sneaky?" Ruff backed him up.

Arachne timidly entered the debate. "Um," she said quietly. "What about the fish in the boot?" That made me stop and think. It was Snaketail who came up with an uncertain suggestion â€" "Well, maybe the same thing that made the footprints lured the Zippleback into the arena so that it would be at the scene of the crime?"

Astrid slowly nodded. "OK, but how do you explain the Great Hall?" she asked me. My reply was interrupted by Hookfang and Barf and Belch resuming their fight. Barf and Belch snapped their jaws at him while he burst into flames.

"Snotlout, do something about him, please," I told him. "We're trying to think over here." Tuff said idly, "Yeah, I gave up thinking. Never been happier."

The Monstrous Nightmare continued with his tantrum, leaving scorched footprints all over the floor. "Snotlout," I said again. "What? I'm not the boss of him," Snotlout replied. "He always does that when he's angry."

I thought deeply for a second or two, then suddenly snapped my fingers. "That's how I can explain the Great Hall!" I exclaimed excitedly, then boarded Toothless, taking off and leaving a lot of bewildered faces behind.

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****Outside the Great Hall (Toothless' POV)****

Privately, I knew that Hiccup wouldn't be able to convince his father of the dragons' "our" innocence. And of course I wasn't able to tell him this, so I contented myself with taking a few minutes' rest on the Great Hall's doorstep.

A sudden, suspicious noise caused me to raise my head and look down at the twilight village. It seemed to have come from somewhere down there. Thinking that Hiccup would be alright for a while longer without me, I crawled down the steps and into the village, looking out for the source of such a noise.

At the bottom of the stairs, I looked left and right, trying to see where the noise had come from. Just then, another noise sounded in the near distance, and I focused my eyes straight ahead, toward the building where the humans kept all their sharp, pointy weapons.

As I watched, the door suddenly creaked open. Curious, and a mite suspicious, I crept inside, sniffing here and there. I listened intently for whatever might have been or might still be inside the building. My instincts told me to be on my guard, so I was cautious as I advanced.

I looked all around me, noting where all the weapons were stored. They were all over the place, and shined like they were new. I realized that Gobber must polish these in his spare time.

Suddenly, the window on the far side of the room flew open. I meandered over and looked intently out of the rectangular space, wondering what had opened it. _Probably the wind,_ was my initial reaction.

I sniffed. Something smelt like it was burning. That was pretty much a normal smell on Berk, what with the torches and cooking meals and whatnot, but something smelled off about this particular burning scent.

I turned to leave, and that was when I noticed the dancing orange light at the corner of my vision. I swung my head towards it and saw that a fire had somehow started! It was tiny, but spreading fast, and was eating away at a barrel containing something that didn't smell good.

All of a sudden, the barrel exploded in a conflagration of fire. I panicked, racing out of the building as the explosion set the walls and ceiling on fire.

I ran to get Hiccup and his father, to warn them about the damage. _What had blown up that building?_ I wondered at the back of my mind, then shook off the question. I had to warn Hiccup.

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(Hiccup's POV)

When I opened the doors of the Great Hall, my eyes instantly fixed upon the fire far below. Even from this distance, it looked massive, and the cries of the villagers rang out dimly into the night air.

"The armory!" bellowed Stoick, appearing beside me and rushing down to help. "Grab some buckets!"

I followed him down, stumbling a little as I always did when I tried moving too fast on my prosthetic. I reached the armory and heaved the nearest bucket of water at the ever-spreading fire. But it was too heavy, and my poorly aimed throw ended up splashing a Viking instead of the armory.

It was over in seconds. The fire was too wild, too strong, to be put out. The armory collapsed in on itself, with the flames hungrily gobbling up the fallen scraps of wood and steel.

I turned in response to a gurgle. Toothless was bounding toward me, jumping up and down and roaring frantically. He seemed distraught and frightened about something. "What is it, bud?" I asked him, holding a hand to his snout to try and calm him down.

"It was him!" growled a Viking, coming over to us and pointing accusingly at Toothless. "He set the armory on fire!"

There were murmurs and mutters of anger and dismay. I dropped my hand from Toothless' snout, staring at him in shock. "Toothless?" I asked weakly, and he just stared sadly back at me. But he didn't look guilty at all. I instinctively knew that he hadn't caused the fire. Night Furies' flames were blue, not orange like these fires had been.

But no one seemed to notice that. "Every one of our weapons is gone," despaired Stoick as my friends gathered around me, appearing as if by magic. "Prudence!" wailed Gobber, kneeling down and holding a disfigured longsword in his hands. "Me poor darling. I'm so sorry â€" yeh should have had a long, bloodletting life."

Right on cue, Mildew appeared. "She didn't have to die, Gobber," he said softly, then raised his voice. "Hiccup's dragon has left us all utterly defenseless!"

Desperation like nothing I had ever known welled up suddenly inside of me. "Dad!" I cried. "You know Toothless! He would never do such a thing!" But Mildew, as usual, was persistent. "Sure, listen to your boy, Stoick. That's what got us into this mess!"

Mildew got a dismissive nod from Stoick, and obediently moved away. He turned to me and whispered, "See what happens when you leave your dragon all alone, unsupervised?"

I stiffened. I hadn't been expecting something like that coming from Mildew's mouth. "Wh-what did you say?" I asked suspiciously, but before I could question him further, there was another cry from Gobber. "Sydney! I guess yer throat-slicing days are over."

Stoick held his head in his hands with exhaustion. When he turned to me, I couldn't help but feel that things were about to go real wrong.

He didn't disappoint me. "These dragons have caused too much damage," he said grimly. "It's no longer safe to have them on Berk. I want them gone. Round them up and take them back to the Dragon's Nest."

My muscles turned to water as those words wound their way into my heart like worms, spreading despair and fear. "Whatâ€|?" I breathed, unable to believe it.

My father turned to the crowd that had gathered and proclaimed, "By the end of the day tomorrow, there will be no more dragons on Berk." Then he glared right at Batwings and said, "No exceptions."

His voice rang out into the silence that followed, ominous and final. Batwings' eyes grew wide and frightened, and he flexed his wings uselessly, unable to react. I saw the hopelessness in those wide, sapphire orbs of his, and knew that his heart had broken.

He could have said something about Siren Island. He could have said something, as he often did, about Berk not and never being his home. But the Siren stayed silent.

Everyone dispersed. "Don't forget, boy," said Mildew as he stalked off. "After you drop of your dragons, you'll be fixing my roof."

Soon, only me and my friends were left staring at the wreckage of the armory. "This is wrong," I said, anger and suspicion embedded in my voice. "I know," Astrid replied, voice cracking. "It's horrible. It's the worst day of my life."

I put a hand on her shoulder. "No, Astrid. Something here doesn't add up." Fishlegs began to move, saying over his shoulder, "All I know is that I'm losing Meatlug."

Astrid sighed and moved away from me. "I just need time to fix this!" I promised them. "What are you talking about?" scoffed Snaketail. "It's over," said Snotlout. "Yeah," replied Ruff, slouching away with her brother following close behind.

I could scarcely believe it. My friends, usually so ready to help, so ready to make things better, had given up.

I was alone. And I couldn't do anything alone.

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****Hel's Gate****

My friends and I rode our dragons through the mists of Hel's Gate. Fishlegs and Meatlug were in a small boat, following us as we flew overhead. Gobber was in a boat behind Fishlegs, accompanied by several adult dragons as well as all the hatchlings that had settled on Berk a short time ago.

The boats ran aground on the pebbly shoreline, and the dragons landed around them. I jumped off of Toothless and sadly scratched him under the chin. Astrid hugged Stormfly and murmured, "I'm going to miss you."

The twins took turns hugging each of Barf and Belch's heads. Snaketail and Horrorcow shared a wordless goodbye, meeting their fist and tail together in farewell. Fishlegs piled boulders onto the ground and choked out a goodbye to Meatlug. The Gronckle flopped to the ground in despair.

"Be strong, buddy," Snotlout told Hookfang as he quickly hugged the dragon around the neck. "I know you're going to miss me." And then a seabird flew by and Hookfang excitedly ran after it.

"He's crying," Snotlout claimed. "He's crying on the inside."

I finished taking off Toothless' saddle and riding gear. He warbled sadly, looking into my eyes. I stared right back and said solemnly, "Some day, I'll be back for you. I promise." I put down the riding gear and slipped it into a niche between some rocks.

As I walked away, back toward the boat, I heard Toothless' heavy footsteps behind me. "No, bud," I told him, turning back around to face him. "You have to stay here and take care of all the other dragons. It's what you're born to do, remember?"

He gurgled softly and looked up at me, sadness in his eyes. "It's going to be okay, Toothless," I told him, smiling gently. "Trust me." I held out a hand, and after a moment he pushed his head up against my hand, saying that he did and would always.

I gave him one last hug, then turned and walked away dejectedly, back to the boat. I got in, and didn't stop looking at Toothless alone on the beach until the Dragon's Nest was far away.

Just as the island disappeared into the mists, I heard a nearby ripple in the water. I looked over the edge of the boat to see a head staring back up at me with its blue eyes. Batwings smiled and whispered, "Goodbye, friends," and then sank back silently into the water.

Everyone was silent for the rest of the trip. Leaning against the mast of the ship, I noticed Astrid beside me, doing her best to hold in her tears but failing. I walked a couple of paces toward her and wrapped my arms around her. She did nothing except lean into me and sniffle miserably.

Idly, I pushed her bangs out of her eyes with a finger. Speaking to no-one in particular, I said, "There's something Mildew said that I can't stop thinking about. He said, 'See what happens when you leave your dragon all alone, unsupervised?' He knew Toothless wasn't with me just before the armory fire."

Astrid looked up at me, not sad but curiously interested. "So?" she prodded. "So, he lives on the other side of town," I told her. "How would he know what had happened, and how would he know where we were before the fire?"

She pushed herself away from me and studied my face for a second.

Then she whispered, "What are you suggesting?"

My expression was like volcanic rock when I said firmly, "I think he did it. I think he did all of it, and he did it so that my father would get rid of the dragons."

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****Mildew's House****

The old man was out in the village, wheeling his cabbages into the plaza. I was on the roof of his house, fixing the damage done by Snotlout several days earlier.

As I nailed in another plank of wood, I remembered Astrid's last words to me yesterday " _That's a pretty serious accusation. How are you going to prove it?_ "

I looked around. Mildew, or anyone else, was nowhere in sight.

Uncoiling a length of rope I had brought with me and tying it to part of the house, I threw it down into the hole and slid down. I landed lightly on my feet and looked wide-eyed at my surroundings. Mildew's house was pretty simple " there was a closet, a bed, some shields and stuffed dragon heads adorning the walls " nothing too fancy.

Oh, yes, and Fungus was walking around without a care in the world, bleating to himself and innocently watching me. I warily glanced at him back, then began to look around, wondering what proof Mildew might be hiding.

It was then that something caught my eye. I walked over to the closet, looking down where the curtain scraped the floor. There was something poking out from the curtain. Wrinkling my brow in suspicion, I pulled back the curtain " and saw a pair of hollowed out-and-stuffed Zippleback feet sitting on the floor. Propped against the wall was a set of genuine Monstrous Nightmare talons, tied to a long stick.

I slid my feet into the Zippleback slippers and picked up the Nightmare talons, getting a feel for how they might have been used.

This was the proof I needed. It all came together in my mind " Mildew had stolen the boots while walking around in these slippers, making sure that some of his footprints were left in the snow. He had lured the Zippleback to the arena with the trout in order to frame it. Then, he had stormed the Great Hall in the dead of night with his Nightmare talons, leaving those gashes in the walls and benches.

However, he had been careless about a few things " Mildew had forgotten to hide his own boots, and take the food during his 'rampage'. Batwings had pointed each of these things out, but the Vikings were either too stubborn or too stupid to realize it.

Suddenly, the doorknob rattled. Instantly, I put the items back and

scrambled back up the rope, Fungus watching me in bewilderment. I made it back onto the roof and pulled up the rope just as Mildew entered the door.

I listened closely as he greeted Fungus. I watched through the hole in the roof as Mildew reached into the closet and pulled out the dragon-made items. "These served us well, Fungus," he murmured, but not quietly enough. "Shame we have to get rid of them."

I could do nothing but watch as Mildew, with his sheep following, made his way slowly to the edge of the cliff near where his house was stationed and threw my proof of his actions into the ocean.

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Do you have someone that you can trust with your life? If so, you don't know how lucky you are. People like that are as rare as precious gems.

So if you find a person that you can trust without question, hold them close to your heart and never let them go.

For there are others out there who will use that trust against youâ€|

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****Ocean (No POV)****

The Zippleback feet and Nightmare claws settled to the seabed with a muffled thump and puffs of sand. But they didn't stay there for long, as the ocean current picked them up and carried them far into the open sea.

There they drifted, alone in the vast big blue, with only the occasional fish taking a cautious nibble out of them before moving on. The items continued to move with the slow current until they caught the attention of a passing shark.

Curious and somewhat fascinated by the items, the shark grabbed them in its mouth and continued its swim, this time with a definite destination in mind â€" the Dragon's Nest.

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****I'm proud and happy to say that I indeed have someone that I can trust with my life. Do any of you?*****

****Mildew did it all â€" he stole the boots and destroyed them, lured the Zippleback into the arena, tore up the Great Hall, set fire to the armory. And the worst part is, his hard work paid off.*****

****See you all soon, readers, and please review in the meantime.*****

****P.S. Please don't ask which episode is next, otherwise I'll have to tie you to a mast and ship you off for fear you've gone mad.*****

24. Alvin and the Outcasts

****So, I'm sure everyone knows what happens next, but that does nothing to ease the sorrow. The dragons are banished and Mildew, for once, is happy. Hiccup, predictably, is trying to find a way to bring the dragons back, and the Outcasts decide to strike at a most convenient time.****

****Also, this chapter has a few references to the Shark Wars series in it. It shows Batwings' relationships with the underwater world and the creatures that inhabit it.****

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There's an old Viking saying " when your friend is roasting on the spit, you're the one that feels the fire.

Mildew has made the entire village believe that dragons are too wild, that we all can't live together in peace.

He's wrong, and I'm going to prove it.

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****Dragon's Nest (No POV)****

The fog was thick around the volcanic island. The immense skeleton of a long-dead dragon lay on the rocky coastline, serving as a reminder of everything the island had gone through. A lone Boneknapper picked its way around the skeleton, searching for a bone small enough to utilize as armor.

But the timid dragon was rapidly scared away by the fighting of a Monstrous Nightmare and a Hideous Zippleback. The argument had started the previous day, on another faraway island, where they had been pampered and loved. Now, every dragon at the Nest was bad-tempered.

Inside the massive skull lay a lone Night Fury, the prince of all these dragons. He was restless as he tossed and turned in his sleep, dreaming of the one Viking he knew would eventually come back for them.

On the crest of the cavernous skull coiled a lone eel-like creature. He was the only Siren on the island, as the rest of his kind were far, far away. Why he had come to this area to serve the Red Death years ago was a mystery even to him. But now, he perched on top of his old queen's skull, looking out across the foggy seas as if he could see all the way to Berk.

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****Berk (Hiccup's POV)****

For the thousandth time this week, I stood upon the beach and gazing out in the direction of Hel's Gate. It had been a full week and a half since my father had banished the dragons, Toothless and Batwings among them.

When I had last seen Toothless, I had promised him that I would be

back. Now, I was about to keep that promise. I had gathered the other teens and organized a scavenger hunt of sorts for the Zippleback slippers and Nightmare talons that Mildew had thrown into the sea. _He will NOT get away with this,_ I seethed in the back of my mind.

"Arrrrgggghh!" grumbled Snotlout, drawing my attention away from the ocean. "We've been here for hours and we haven't found anything!" My temper flared and I yelled back, "We've been here for all of ten minutes! And you've done nothing but buildâ€| that." I finished with a note of disgust in my voice.

"That," replied Snotlout with pride, "is Snotlout Manor." I gave him the most withering of stares as he sidled up to Astrid and said suggestively, "All I need now is a queen." She scoffed and ignored him.

Meanwhile, Tuff busied himself with knocking down and stomping on the amalgamation of rocks and twigs. "What are you doing?" wailed Snotlout. "Storming the castle," came the smug reply.

"Come on, guys!" I yelled, shutting everyone up. "Mildew framed our dragons! I saw dragon feet in his house and watched him throw them into the ocean!" Fishlegs timidly piped up, "I don't want to be Norbert the Negative, but the ocean is really, really vast. And the chances of finding those dragon feet are only slightly worse than Snotlout and Astrid" â€" "_Don't_ go there," Astrid snarled at him. Fishlegs quietly amended, "Slightly better?" She just glared until he made a zipping motion across his lips.

"Fishlegs is right," Astrid told me, softening her voice in order to make me calm down. "Even if Mildew did throw them in the ocean, there not just going to wash up on shore here."

Just as my face fell, Snotlout suddenly whooped, "Found it!" My spirits rose and I said confidently, "You were saying?"

I raced over to Snotlout, only to stop dead when I saw him cradling a small club in his arms. "Haven't seen this since I was a baby. You never forget your first bludgeon." He sighed and rocked it from side to side.

I sighed as well, but it was a sigh of despair instead of contentment. "Just keep looking," I said miserably.

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****Gobber's Forge (Stoick's POV)****

I looked on as Gobber put the finishing touches on an axe. I was glad to see that he was happy to be back at his old post, making weapons just like old times, at least for a little bit. But until he had completely restocked our armory, we were completely defenseless against enemy tribes â€" or the dragons, if they decided to take revenge on us for banishing them. I knew that if Batwings or Toothless, for example, were angry enough, they'd definitely have the will and intelligence to do it.

"One down, three hundred an' forty-five ta go," Gobber announced

proudly, holding up the finished axe. "Can't you go any faster?" I fumed. "Until you replenish our weapon supply, we're entirely defenseless."

Gobber gave me an arched eyebrow in response to my offensive tone. "Maybe yeh shoulda thought o' that before sendin' the dragons away," he said, hanging up the axe. "You know I had no choice," I retorted. "They destroyed the armory."

The blacksmith gave me another eyebrow. "Yeh really believe tha', now do ya?" he asked rhetorically. I gave him a roll of my eyes and an exaggerated nod. Making a sound under his breath, Gobber got to work on another weapon. "This would be a bad time to be attacked," he muttered. "Not tha' there's ever a good time, but this time would be particularly bad."

I huffed, "I know, Gobber." I paced around the smithy, trying to think. My thoughts were interrupted by Gobber's next words "Especially by Alvin the Treacherous."

Alvin, I thought, face twisting into a scowl. The despicable old brute was leader of the Outcast tribe, a tribe that was known for being thoroughly evil and wanting to take control of the entire Barbaric Archipelago "the series of islands to which Berk, New Birth Island, and others belonged to. The Outcasts had no allies, hence the name. No chief wanted them on their side, Bertha the Unsinkable and Oswald the Agreeable most of all. Alvin and his men would double-cross an entire tribe for a simple turkey dinner.

"Our oldest and most feared enemy," continued Gobber as if I wasn't even there. "He'd gladly kill us all to take Berk fer his own." I silenced him with a shouted, "I KNOW, Gobber!"

I walked away, muttering in disgust. "Alvin the Treacherous" I said, the name curling into the air like the vilest poison.

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****Under the Sea (Batwings' POV)****

With nothing better to do, I decided that afternoon to go for a swim through the sea. It had been a very long time since I had done that, being occupied with Hiccup and the gang these past few months.

The water was pleasantly cold, and the current swished past my sides as I swam on in my eel form. Occasionally, I'd flap my wings for a thrust forward, but I mostly flicked my tail from side to side to move. It was silent, with only a school of small fish swimming past at the moment.

My thoughts wandered as I relaxed, back in my element as I was "Sirens were known for loving the water, after all. I remembered hearing from one of the dragons at the Nest, a Gronckle, about the Outcasts being more active. I didn't know much about the Outcasts except from what I had heard a long time ago from the Peaceables. Unfortunately, none of that information was good.

What had the dragon said again? Something about their leader, Alvin. I snorted to myself and thought, _Not exactly an intimidating name

for a demented barbarian._ According to the dragon's news, Alvin was having to put up with more frequent dragon raids these days, and was currently looking for someone called "the Dragon Conqueror". When I had asked the Gronckle who that was, he had grunted, "No idea. Apparently he's ten feet tall and with the strength of a dozen men."

I had never heard of such a person in my life, despite him supposedly being such a great warrior. _The only "Dragon Conqueror" I know of is Hiccup,_ I thought, _and he isn't ANY of that. Ten feet tall and the strength of twelve men, my tail fin. He's barely five and a half feet, and with the muscles of a quarter of a man._

The school of fish scattered as I swam through them. Something was revealed to have been blocked by the school, and I squinted at the shadowy shape. As I got closer, it was revealed to be a blue shark â€" with something odd dangling from its mouth.

Then I noticed something else. I recognized the blue shark! He was my old friend Spear from the waters off Siren Island. "Spear!" I roared, and the shark turned, eyes widening at the sight of me.

"Batwings!" he exclaimed through his mouthful, rushing over to swim by my side. "Haven't seen you in ages, big fin." I smiled and replied, switching easily from my usual speech pattern to the lingo of the sea. "Hey, I was just preoccupied by those chowder-brained humans out there. And my old jelly-headed queen's as dead as a prehistore monster."

Spear laughed. "That's good to hear," he said, dropping his baggage from his mouth and letting them drift downwards. Curious, I reached down and balanced the items on my tail. "What are these?" I asked, and he shrugged. "No idea," he admitted. "I found them drifting in the current some time ago. I thought you'd know what to do with them, so I went to find you."

I narrowed my eyes as I sniffed them. "They've got the scent of something old and moldy," Spear put in helpfully, "like dead greenie. And meat, too â€" something like haddock or bass, but I can't put my fin on it. Maybe one of the landsharks' domestic animals."

Carefully, I looked the items over. They indeed smelled like dead seaweed and some kind of animalâ€| sheep, maybe. There were three â€" a set of boots shaped like Zippleback feet and a clawed staff, the talons coming out long and curved like those on a Monstrous Nightmare.

Zipplebackâ€| sheepâ€| old and moldyâ€| Those words chased each other around my head as I thought. _Moldâ€| moldâ€| mold and mildewâ€| mildew? Wait, not mildew. THE Mildew! And the sheep smell is Fungus!_ My eyes lit up visibly, something that Spear noticed. "Figured something out, did you?" the shark asked curiously.

I nodded, almost to myself. _Mildew blamed the dragons on the destruction of Berk's armoryâ€| and the Great Hallâ€| and the boot theft. He thought a Monstrous Nightmare wrecked the hall, and a Zippleback stole the bootsâ€|_

Something clicked in my mind as I glanced once more at the items.

The Zippleback prints were too light, I remembered. _And the Nightmare never took any food during its rampage. Mildew was quick to blame them both, even though his boots were never stolen._

Then the soggy, moldy scent wound its way into my nostrils, and I realized the horrible truth. These items were Mildew's. The old man had blamed the same species of dragons that these items were modeled after, or perhaps came from. He had been so eager to push the blame on the dragons " because he was the one behind their banishment.

Our banishment, I seethed, growing angrier. "Something wrong?" asked Spear, and I nodded again. "Very wrong," I replied. "Thanks for your help, Spear. And tell everyone by the reef off Siren Island that I said hi." The shark nodded and swam off silently.

I headed in another direction, clutching the items in my jaws. _Mildew is so going to get it!_ I vowed, heading directly for Berk.

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****Hiccup's House (Hiccup's POV)****

"I'm telling you, Dad!" I said forcefully. "I saw a pair of Zippleback feet in Mildew's house! He must have used them to make the footprints of the dragon that supposedly stole the boots!"

Plan A had been to search for the items ourselves. Failing that, I had no choice but to go with Plan B " go to my father and tell him what I had discovered. Even if they didn't believe me, they had to know.

"Well then," Stoick said after I had finished. "Let's go have a look at them." I scratched my head and reluctantly spilled more of the beans. "Yeah, um, there's kinda going to be a problem with that. I, uh, also saw him throw them into the ocean." I sighed resignedly.

"I know you're upset about the dragons, son," my dad said, less upset himself than I thought he would be. "But you're going to need evidence to accuse a man of high treason." I bit my lip and stayed silent.

Walking outside and leaving Stoick alone, I soon ran into Astrid and Arachne. I didn't have anything better to do, so I asked them if they wanted to take a walk around the island. They accepted, and I found myself wandering the cliffs with my " dare I say it? " girlfriend and her younger sister.

"Astrid, we have to prove that Mildew did it," I was saying. "We have to if we ever want to see our dragons again." She just held my hand and said sadly, "I just hope they're okay."

I attempted a smile and lightly punched her on the shoulder. She stopped, startled for a second, and then grinned and kissed my cheek.

"Um, hey lovebirds," Arachne called from the edge of the cliff, nervously. We joined her, and she pointed at the rock spire maze off in the distance. "Why would one out our ships be anchoring there?"

she asked.

Indeed, there was a small boat beside the smallest of the spires, not moving despite the wind and the current. I took out my spyglass and held it up to the boat. I was able to see enough of the strange boat to know that something was off.

"It's not one of our ships," I said to them. "Let's go get my dad." I rushed off, Astrid and Arachne right behind me.

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****Berk Coast (Batwings' POV)****

It had taken me longer than I expected to reach Berk, because now it was the dead of night. I shapeshifted into my humanoid form and waded toward shore. I was halfway through the waist-deep water when something moved out of the corner of my eye. Dropping my cargo and crouching down until the water licked at my eyes, I observed from a distance.

A longboat was moving slowly toward the beach, running aground when it got there. Several strange men jumped off the boat, abandoning their oars and fetching axes and swords. They did not look friendly, and adding to that impression was the Nadder skull mounted on the front of the boat.

"It's good to be back on the shores of Berk," rasped the biggest, meanest one. From what I knew of Vikings, the biggest and meanest of the tribe tended to be the leader. "Good for you, Alvin," replied his aide, a thin, unpleasant man with a bone clutched in his hands. "Not so good for them." The two chuckled and walked further up the beach.

Underwater, my mouth opened in a gasp. Alvin? That meant the marauders were Outcasts! Picking up my cargo, I walked to shallower waters, making sure not to be seen by the Outcasts. When the water was only up to my ankles, I lifted off into flight, knowing that I was too dark to be seen, and landed on a small cliff nearby.

"What was that?" asked Alvin, voice grating on my ears and ripping through the otherwise silent night. "Probably just a bat or something," assured his comrade. "I don't think so, Savage," Alvin snarled. "More likely a wild dragon. But never mind that, we can catch it once the Dragon Conqueror is ours."

The Gronckle had been right â€" the Outcasts were looking for the so-called "Dragon Conqueror". But if they were here on Berkâ€¦
They're after Hiccup! I suddenly realized, taking off once more and heading for the house he shared with his father.

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****Great Hall (Hiccup's POV)****

Every Viking on the island was huddled in the Great Hall, talking worriedly amongst themselves. Me and my friends were together, whispering urgently to each other. I had already given my dad the news of an unfamiliar ship docked near the island, and from my description he concluded that it was an Outcast ship. Now that the

sun had set, it was too dark to venture outside, and too dangerous with Outcasts supposedly roaming around.

"This is no time to panic!" shouted Stoick over the hubbub, causing everyone to quiet down. "That's just what the Outcasts are counting on!" Suddenly, Spitelout rushed in and ran up beside Stoick, panting for breath. "Spitelout, did ya get a count?" asked Gobber.

"I saw thirty men at least," he said tiredly. "All armed to the teeth. Without any weapons, we'll never be able to fight them head-on."

I drummed my fingers on the table, deep in thought, when a voice brought me out of it. "No weapons and Outcasts on our shores!" said Mildew, clutching his staff. "All thanks to your boy and his dragons!"

As Stoick waved him off, I could see my friends' tempers grow worse. "Oh, so the dragons brought the Outcasts here?" grumbled Tuffnut. "The dragons are gone, what's he so mad about?" Astrid wondered. "Is he trying to get Hiccup banished next?" Snaketail growled sarcastically. Arachne sighed and murmured, "Will he ever be happy?"

We all gave her skeptical looks, and she blushed and looked at her feet.

"Mulch, Bucket!" Stoick called. "Gather up the mothers and the children, and lead them to Thor's Beach. They'll be safe in the caves there." Astrid raised her hand and called, "We can help fight! We've been trained as warriors."

All the teens, plus Arachne, nodded in agreement. Snotlout scoffed and boasted, "She may have been trained, but I was born a warrior." No one paid any attention to him.

Stoick walked over to our table and handed Astrid a battered hatchet. "Take this," he said. "It used to be Alvin's. Just go with the others, you can help protect them." Astrid nodded, and motioned for us to follow her out of the hall.

She turned back when she reached the door and gestured for me to come along. I waved them off and mouthed, "I'll catch up." My friends all nodded and filed out.

I turned to Stoick. "Please, dad, let me go get the dragons. At least with them, we can defend ourselves." I expected him to put down my plea, but he nodded without any hesitation. "Go," he told me. "But be careful. You don't know what Alvin is capable of."

I smiled, hugged him quickly, and then raced out of the hall, leaving him and Gobber alone.

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****Cliffs (Batwings' POV)****

Damn it, I cursed in my mind. Hiccup's house was unoccupied from the looks of it, and same with the rest of the village — it was as if all the Vikings had abandoned it. _They must have found out about

the Outcasts already._ Quickly, I flew to the Great Hall, just after dropping off the Zippleback feet and Nightmare talons on Hiccup's bed. I perched unseen on the roof as Stoick, Gobber, and several other adult Vikings walked out.

"The rest of you," Stoick was commanding, "we'll head to the woods. Nobody knows that forest like we do." Gobber raised his axe and proclaimed, "And when Alvin comes lookin' fer us there, he'll walk righ' into our trap!" They then disappeared into the village.

I needed to find Hiccup and his friends and lead them back to the Dragon's Nest. Then at least they'd be able to defend Berk from the invading force. I took flight once more, passing over the cliffs. Hearing voices, I perched in a nearby tree and listened in.

"You heard Stoick," one was saying. "We need to go down to Thor's Beach and help protect the villagers. We can't waste time worrying about the dragons." My eyes widened. That was Snaketail's voice!

Responding to her statement was Fishlegs " I could easily see his wide figure even in the dark. "Oh, Meatlug," he was sighing. "I miss you so much. 'The moon is full, my heart is empty.'" There was silence as Snaketail and I waited for him to continue.

"Hmm," he said at last. "What rhymes with 'empty'?" Snaketail was about to say something when another voice cut through the night. "Don't waste your time," it said. "Nothing rhymes with empty!"

I peeked through the branches at the sound of Fishlegs' gasp and Snaketail's quiet scream. I myself gasped, although I made an effort to keep it silent " it was Alvin and his assistant Savage! Bracing myself, I readied for the attack.

Alvin had Fishlegs by the scruff of his neck, and had Snaketail trapped in his other huge fist. "Who's the Dragon Conqueror?" he growled at both of them, looking from one to the other in case either had the answer.

Fishlegs opened his mouth, and Alvin looked at him expectantly. I was muttering, "Don't tell him, don't tell him," to myself desperately. And then Fishlegs gave his answer " a piercing, girlish scream that caused everyone listening to wince and clamp their hands over their ears.

Alvin grunted and hurled him over the cliff. A distant splash sounded only a second later, by which time the leader of the Outcasts turned to Snaketail. Now was the time " I had to act.

I rushed out of the trees with a screech, not even bothering to shapeshift again. I saw Alvin and Savage turn and flinch in surprise at the sight of me. In that split second, I had his arm in my talons and was hovering above him, fangs bared menacingly.

"What the" exclaimed Savage. "That there's a Siren, I'd bet me sword collection on it!" snarled Alvin, as he shook me free and sent me tumbling to the ground. Undeterred, I hissed and lunged again, avoiding Alvin's fist by a millimeter.

His missed swing left the arm holding Snaketail exposed. With another

hiss, I plunged my fangs into his arm, causing him to bellow and release Snaketail. I didn't even bother staying to continue the fight. Shapeshifting and letting the girl climb quickly onto my back, I took off toward Thor's Beach.

"Thanks, Batwings," she said breathlessly. "I'm glad to see you, but what in Odin's name are you doing here?" I flew on without even turning to look up at her and replied, "Long story. I found a few items that Hiccup might find interesting, so I was on my way to drop them off when I got myself into this huge mess."

Snaketail gripped my neck tighter as we encountered a headwind. "Not that I care about his well-being, but what did you do to Alvin?" I laughed cruelly and said in response, "Siren venom â€" not deadly in any way, shape, or form, unless you're a troublesome fish. But it'll cause him weeks of pain, and if he's unlucky, he'll have to get that arm amputated before the venom spreads."

I flew on, following Snaketail's directions to Thor's Beach. I hoped that I'd find Hiccup and the others there. _They have to be safe!_

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****Berk Village (Hiccup's POV)****

Stealthily as a Terrible Terror in a nest of sleeping Blundertails, I stole my way through the village, slipping into darkened alleyways and shortcuts every chance I got. So far, I hadn't encountered any Outcasts, but it was too much to hope they found Berk not worth conquering.

Racing out into the open, I headed on a direct route to the docks. If I could get even a small skiff into the ocean and toward the Dragon's Nest, I'd be good. But luck was running against me, as when I got to the docks, an Outcast boat suddenly appeared and anchored itself in the harbor.

I doubled back, running back to the village. But I had only run a few yards before I saw a dim light appear around the corner, and hostile voices reached my ears. I backed away from the approaching Outcast party, only to find that the crew aboard the boat had climbed ashore much faster than I had thought and was now right behind me.

Neither party had seen me yet, so I did the first thing that came to mind and quickly ducked underneath a house's porch. There was just enough space for me to slide through and hide before the Outcasts walked past, talking amongst themselves.

It was only when their chatter had faded when I heard the shuddering breaths. Whatever it was that was breathing was unnervingly close. I could even feel its breath on my leg. Slowly and cautiously, ready to dash out from my hiding place and run at a moments notice, I turned around and yelped.

"Fishlegs!" I scolded him, for it was indeed my friend making the shuddering, gasping breaths. He seemed to be a combination of frightened and cold, and his clothes were soaking wet as if he had just gone for a swim.

"A-Alvin's looking for you," he stuttered when he stopped shivering enough to speak. "He's looking for 'the Dragon Conqueror'."

I stopped and stared at him. A plan started to form in my head, but I had only halfway thought it through when I heard the sound of beating wings. I couldn't believe I was hearing such a sound at a time like this, and I raced out of my hiding spot to look for the source of the noise.

"Batwings," I murmured as I saw his eel-like form streak across the night sky. I scrapped my original plan, and a new one formed. "Fishlegs!" I called quietly to my friend. "Come on, we need to go!"

We dashed after the Siren, but soon lost him. Panting, we stopped at my house, only to hear voices coming from inside. "We'll split up. You four go to the forest, and we'll head to the beach. Tell me, Savage, how many hostages is a Dragon Conqueror worth?"

Fishlegs and I quickly flattened ourselves against a shadowed wall as the Outcasts left. As soon as we were alone, my friend asked worriedly, "What do we do now?" I replied in a voice as strong as iron. "You go into the woods and warn my dad. I need to get ahead of Alvin and warn Mulch and the others."

He nodded, and dashed off, surprisingly stealthy for such a large boy.

I went in the opposite direction, already wondering where Batwings could have gone. _Never mind,_ I thought. _My plan needs him, but looks like finding him isn't the top priority right now._

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****Cue the dramatic music!****

****Just kidding, we'll leave it there until next time. Oh, and sorry if you didn't understand the Shark Wars references. I just wanted to include them because it's a good series.****

****Review please, and see you later, readers!****

25. Return of the Dragons

****Ugh, I hate coming up with new names for the second part of each episode. This one's far from creative. I'm going to write the "Portrait of Hiccup" episode next, so can anyone help me out with a good title for Part 2?***

****Matt: Sorry, but no. I like the supernatural, but I'm more into faeries and magic than werewolves and whatnot.****

****However, and this depends on how you look at it, Batwings could be considered a half-human, half-dragon, at least some of the timeâ€|****

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****Hiccup's House (No POV)****

It was silent in the Haddock household. A gust of wind blew a window open, making the blanket on top of Hiccup's unoccupied bed flutter slightly.

The items â€" two Zippleback feet and a Nightmare claw â€" sat innocently upon the bed where Batwings had left them. And since there was no one in the house, there was consequently no one to witness a curious trio of Terrible Terrors enter, grab the items, and leave through the open window.

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****Berk Woods (Stoick's POV)****

Gobber, Spitelout, and the rest of my men were grouped with me in the woods â€" more specifically, we were on a small wooded cliff overlooking the sea. No one would find us here, unless we were showed them the way. Of course, that was the whole idea of our plan â€" to lure the Outcasts into a trap.

"When they come lookin' fer us in the forest," Gobber said with satisfaction, "they'll hafta come through here." I nodded and said, "Alright, what weapons do we have."

Gobber looked reluctant, then sighed and spilled out the contents of the sack he was carrying. "Two fryin' pans, a rolling pin, and a kitchen knife," he informed us. "Plus me axe," he added, waving his weapon around a little more obviously.

I glanced down at the items in front of me with a scoff. "And what are we going to do with these when we meet Alvin?" I asked scornfully. "Bake him a cake?" Gobber bent down and picked up the kitchen knife smugly. "Pie would be nice, too," he replied, meeting me with an equal amount of sarcasm. "Who doesn't like pie?"

He tossed the knife with all of his might, and it buried itself in a nearby tree trunk. Less than a second later, the trunk split in two. "Tha' could be useful," he said, looking on with a satisfied smile.

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****(Batwings' POV)****

When I heard voices in the distance, I plunged through the trees and landed heavily on the forest floor. Snaketail dismounted, confusion in her eyes. "Go warn the others about Alvin's plan for Hiccup. I'll find the boy himself and warn him myself."

The girl nodded and dashed off into the forest without a moment's delay. Glancing back only once at her retreating figure, I shapeshifted back into my humanoid form and rapidly climbed a tree, perching on the top-most branch. Holding a hand over my eyes, I gazed out at my surroundings.

The Outcasts wouldn't be long in coming. I could see the footprints leading toward Thor's Beach a mile away, and no doubt the Outcasts could too._ That's why I have to find Hiccup fast,_ I thought,

before they get their grubby paws on him.

Just then, I was aware of the voices coming closer. Narrowing my eyes, I scuttled back down the tree and followed the sounds. Soon, I had reached a winding rock path that coiled around a rock spire and led down to the coast. The voices were coming from near there, so I took flight and flew parallel to the path.

It was then that I spotted the group of Vikings headed down the spire. "Come on," came a familiar voice â€" Mulch's. "The cavern's just up ahead."

I flew in and landed beside him, much to his startled surprise. "Batwings!" he whisper-shouted. "You scared ten years off of me!" I just grinned and said back, "It's my specialty. It's a long story as to why I'm here, but it can wait. Where's Bucket?" I suddenly asked, looking around for the absent Viking.

A little girl suddenly appeared underfoot, tugging at my pant leg. "He went looking for my Lamby," she said innocently. I gritted my teeth in frustration as Mulch exclaimed, "Oh, fer the love ofâ€¦ Why am I always looking for Bucket? I mean, why can't he â€" Bucket!" he suddenly called, walking back up the rock path.

I searched among the Vikings, but found none of my friends. I flapped off, back into the forest, looking for Hiccup once more.

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(Stoick's POV)

Gesturing for my men to be quiet, I listened for something I thought I had heard just a couple of seconds ago. The sound was faint, but getting louder, sounding like the crackling of shrubs as something ran through them. It was accompanied by shouts and Gobber's voice shouting insults at the pursuers I knew were following.

I got into position as the blacksmith burst through the foliage and into the clearing. Turning toward the small mob of Outcasts that had been chasing him, he muttered tiredly, "Looks likeâ€¦ ya got me, boys."

I rushed from my hiding place with a loud battle cry, slamming my fist into one Outcast's startled face. Unconscious immediately, he slumped to the ground. With no time to waste, I grabbed his hammer and bashed another Outcast with it. He, too, fell.

In under five seconds, it was over. The last Outcast fell to my stolen hammer, and the other Vikings made their way over to the bodies and grabbed what weapons they could. "Or maybe it's we who've got you," Gobber chuckled.

A sudden rustle in the bushes got my attention, and I caught a glimpse of something large and brown moving through the bushes. It might have just been a wild pig, but I couldn't take any chances.

I signaled for Gobber to go to the left while I went right, following the being's trail. Just as it passed me, making some kind of hurried panting sound, I leapt at it with a yell, tackling it to the

ground.

I raised my fist, only to have a voice squeal, "Stoick, no!" I took a closer look at what I had trapped in my hands â€" it was Hiccup's friend Fishlegs. "For the love of Thor, Fishlegs, I could have killed you!"

He sighed and flopped to the ground as I let him go. "Thank you for not killing me," he said, almost too shocked to speak. "Alvin the Treacherous grabbed me and said he's here for Hiccup!"

I stood up as his words sunk in. _Of course_. "Hiccup," I murmured, now knowing the kind of danger my son was in.

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****(Hiccup's POV)****

I could hear the urgent flapping of dragon wings as I stealthily made my way through the forest, but I wasn't able to fully concentrate on the soft sound just now. I was busy listening in on the familiar, evil chuckles of Alvin and his men, only a couple of trees away.

Hastily, I flattened myself against a trunk as the Outcasts led Mulch and Bucket down toward Thor's Beach. Muttering to myself, I stole after them, for once thankful that I was skinny enough for a decently-sized tree to conceal me.

The trip didn't last long â€" it ended at Thor's Beach. Several other Vikings were already there, including my friends, with a dozen Outcasts standing guard around them. I watched Alvin march to the head of the imprisoned group.

My first impulse was to try and save them. But then it occurred to me that I didn't have a plan for this, and worse, Batwings was nowhere to be seen.

I had to settle for watching and waiting. Although I didn't want to do it this time, I had no choice but to listen and hope that I would learn something.

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****Thor's Beach (Astrid's POV)****

I glared defiantly up at the leader of the Outcasts as he sidled up onto a large boulder to address us. I was a little frightened, sure â€" who wouldn't be? â€" but that didn't mean I had to act like it. And at the centre of my fear was a small, boiling core of hatred buried beneath.

"If you haven't yet figured it out," he announced, grinning sadistically. "I'm the one and only Alvin the Treacherous. And just to be clear, that name was _earned_."

Beside me, Tuffnut smirked. "Alvin?" he asked in a very loud whisper. "How'd he earn that?" I snickered along with the others. There was nothing like a little disrespect of a horrifying, dimwitted barbarian

to lighten the mood a little " even more so when it was right behind said barbarian's back.

"Your leader's gone and abandoned ya," Alvin was saying smugly. I noticed him wince suddenly and lightly clutch his arm as if it was badly aching. Hiding it well, he continued, "But don't worry, Stoick doesn't concern me. I'm not here for 'im! I want the Dragon Conqueror!"

It didn't take Fishlegs to know that he was talking about Hiccup. Alvin looked down on us imperiously, waiting for someone to take the hint and give him any information.

Mildew stepped forward and said snidely in my ear, "Well, say goodbye to your beloved Hiccup! AL" " he didn't get any further than that. My hatred suddenly bubbled up to the surface and I ruthlessly crashed my balled fist into his face. Out like a light, the old man's nose broke as he slumped forward and was caught by Snaketail.

Alvin was staring down at us expectantly. "My granddad's frail," Snaketail told him sweetly. "He's in dire need of a nap." The Outcast leader grunted and turned away. "Now as I was sayin'," he continued to the crowd. "Tell me who the Dragon Conqueror is, and you'll all go free."

I snorted quietly, not believing him for a second. "A conqueror, come on!" Snotlout laughed. "I'll show him a real conqueror!" Pulling his old bludgeon out from his belt, he started forward, sneaking past the guards and up to Alvin's boulder. About to strike the ugly brute down, Snotlout raised the club " and Alvin idly turned around to face him.

Snotlout almost wet himself. He bowed down, held out the bludgeon, and said respectfully, "For you, sir." Alvin laughed and took the bludgeon. "Mighty nice of ya, son!" he bellowed, ruffling Snotlout's hair. "But check yer trousers " I think you've soiled yourself."

I facepalmed and clicked my fingers. Ruffnut handed me the blade Stoick had given me. Rearing back, I chucked the weapon with all my might, straight at Alvin's head. It twirled through the air, straight and true " and then a shape plunged out of the night and slammed into Alvin, driving him away and putting himself right in the path of the speeding weapon.

The hatchet continued on its way, slamming right into the newcomer's shoulder. A loud shriek split the night, and Batwings fell to the ground, releasing his talons from Alvin's apparently injured arm. I gasped and winced noticeably as I saw the blade embedded in Batwings' arm, and the trickles of blood pouring down.

An Outcast that had witnessed my attack grabbed my arm in a grip of iron and shoved me up next to Batwings. Alvin, clutching his arm again, muttered, "Same arm, you damn dragon!"

He turned to us, glancing from one to the other. Batwings, with effort, ripped the hatchet out with a spurt of blood and threw it hatefully at Alvin's feet. "Me old hatchet!" he exclaimed, picking it up and examining it and the fresh bloodstain. "I was wonderin' when I'd be gettin' this back."

Alvin suddenly put it aside and smirked at us. "Tryin' to kill Alvin the Treacherous, eh?" he asked rhetorically. "You ain't as smart as ya look! Now tell me, who's your Dragon Conqueror?" He suddenly yanked on my hair, forcing out a yelp.

Batwings was staring at him balefully, but couldn't do anything. I knew that if I didn't say anything, Alvin would kill me without a second thought and move on to the next unlucky Viking.

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(Hiccup's POV)

That did it. Seeing Batwings injured and Astrid threatened made me reach the end of my patience. "Leave them alone," I cried, jumping down from my hiding place and striding confidently a few paces toward them.

"Hiccup?" rasped Batwings. His voice carried an undercurrent of restrained pain. "What are you doing here?" I ignored him and looked Alvin in the eye. "I'm the Dragon Conqueror," I told him simply, standing up straight and (hopefully) heroically.

It clearly didn't work, from Alvin's reaction. He raised a skeptical eyebrow, and promptly failed to keep a straight face, releasing Astrid and laughing heartily. "You?" he cackled, grabbing his sizeable belly. "Stoick's little embarrassment?"

I narrowed my eyes, dead serious. "I drove the dragons from Berk," allowing a hint of menace to creep into my voice. "Look around â€" do you see any here, besides the Siren over there?" I pointed to Batwings, and Alvin eyed me thoughtfully.

Never slow on the uptake, Astrid chimed in. "I-It's true," she said with the perfect combination of anxiety and awe. "Zipplebacks, Gronckles, Scauldrons â€" he even conquered a Night Fury!"

Alvin looked even more serious. "You're bluffin'," he told me confidently. "Am I?" I challenged back. This time he got right up in my face and looked me in the eye. I met his stare fearlessly.

Ever so slightly, my eyes shifted to where Batwings stood. One look at the determined expression on his face told me that he had guessed that I had a plan, and what it was. I dipped my head the barest fraction of an inch in a nod.

Batwings shrieked and flew at Alvin, battering him with his wings and claws. Cursing and shouting in outrage, Alvin took a swing at him with the bloodstained hatchet. But he missed as the Siren wheeled off, clutching his wound to stem the flow of blood, and flew in the direction of the distant Hel's Gate.

"That Thor-forsaken dragon!" growled Alvin. "I'd love ta get me revenge on that devil!" I smirked to myself â€" _Just what I've been waiting for. An excuse._ I spoke, drawing Alvin's attention back to me. "Well, I guess there's only one way for me to prove that I'm the Dragon Conqueror, now is there?"

Alvin's eyes slowly brightened with a dawning realization. I told him

in a voice as hard and deadly as the hatchet he wielded, "We're going after that dragon. Take me to the Dragon's Nest."

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****Berk Village (Fungus' POV)****

I dutifully followed behind the Smelly One as he walked alone through the village, muttering to himself. I was perplexed as to what all the commotion was these days â€" strange men with weapons running around and all the usual humans gone.

The Smelly One tapped his staff on the ground impatiently, causing me to look up and give a forlorn "Baaaaaâ€|" He paused to pat my head, and then continued on his way with me on his heels. I didn't like the Smelly One much, but he gave me food and comfort, so I felt obligated to follow him wherever he went.

For some reason, I thought of the Scrawny One, the one who rode the black dragon. Although the dragon frightened me, I rather liked the boy â€" he was kind and often patted my head and gave me clover to chew when we met and the Smelly One wasn't around. The boy smelled better, too.

Where was the boy now? I hadn't seen him since the dragons mysteriously disappeared some time ago. Come to think of it, I could smell him even now. It was a faint scent, as if he had left it behind on something that he had once touched.

I stopped when the Smelly One did. Now I knew that the Scrawny One's scent was emanating from what looked like a pair of dragon feet with no dragon attached to them. I bleated in confusion â€" why would a dragon leave its feet behind?

Nevertheless, I didn't like the feet, and was thankful when the Smelly One picked them up and the accompanying sharp, spiky branch and tossed them in the building where the Two-Limbed One often made sharp, pointy things.

There was a sizzle, and I picked up the smell of something burning. I gave the closest thing a sheep could to a shrug, then followed the Smelly One back out of the village.

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****Hel's Gate (Hiccup's POV)****

For once in my life, I had a plan that I had actually thought, if not completely, then at least mostly, through â€" have Alvin take me to the Dragon's Nest, find Toothless, and send the Outcasts running back to the miserable hunk of rock they came from.

By now, I didn't care if the Outcasts knew that we now rode dragons. If anything, I found myself hoping they could have found out sooner. Maybe if they realized that we had allied ourselves with the beasts, then they'd leave us alone.

So, as we sailed through the mists of Hel's Gate and I stood nonchalantly between two burly Outcasts, I tried to remain calm. It was easier than I expected, especially since Alvin needed me to prove

to him that I was the Dragon Conqueror. Because of that, I give him a good dose or five of sarcasm without worrying about him ending my life right then and there.

"I'm sure Stoick's told ya plenty about your island's most feared enemy," Alvin proclaimed right then, not too subtly, puffing out his sizable chest. "And who was that again?" I asked rhetorically. "Oh yeah, you. Nope. Not so much."

He was shocked and somewhat appalled. "Really?" he asked. "Not a word?" I said smugly, "Nope." He asked again, "Nothin'?" I replied in a bored voice, "Nuh-uh. Nothing about you."

I was pleased to see that my sarcasm was causing his temper to boil. "Look, Alvin," I said, suddenly serious. "All I care about is that I do what you want, and then you leave the people of Berk in peace."

Alvin laughed heartily and slapped me on the back hard enough to leave a mark on my chest. "On me word, boy," he guffawed, and I silently snorted. An Outcast's word was worth about as much as a dead blade of grass to a sheep farmer.

Finally, the mists cleared just enough so that the volcano ominously dominating the Dragon's Nest came into view. A few of the Outcasts audibly gulped, and even Alvin looked nervous at the sight.

"Say, Hiccup," he said, with an undercurrent of fear in his voice that he tried his best to hide. "Isn't this where it's rumored that a humongous dragon slumbers beneath the volcano?" I answered without even looking up. "Yep," I replied, "this is the place. I saw the thing with my own eyes."

The ship ran aground, and Alvin hoisted me up over the edge. All of the soldiers followed, spears and other weapons held in front of them. Everyone except me looked around nervously â€" there was the gurgling and warbling of a thousand hidden dragons coming from everywhere around us.

Alvin's eyes went wide at the sight of the Red Death's skeleton. To be honest, I was a little amazed myself â€" I hadn't seen its bones before. The last thing I remember seeing of the dragon god was its club-like tail coming closer and closer, with Toothless frantically trying to get out of the wayâ€|

I shook my head to clear the painful memory. But then, I heard the Outcasts mutter to themselves and hold their weapons a little higher. "Odin's ghost," exclaimed Alvin as a night-black dragon jumped into view, green eyes slitted and wings spread magnificently. "Is that aâ€|" Alvin began, and I confirmed his unfinished question. "A Night Fury," I told him confidently. "The unholy offspring of lightning and death itself."

Two soldiers, including Alvin's lieutenant Savage, took aim with their crossbows. "Put those away!" I exclaimed desperately, then managed to make my voice sound more cautionary. "It will only make him angrier," I warned, taking a step toward Toothless (for it was obviously him).

There was a flutter of wings somewhere up the mountain, but only I

noticed " the others were too busy staring at Toothless, muttering over the mysterious dragon. I glanced up quickly and saw Batwings, partially hidden by the ledge on which he stood. He nodded once, and then disappeared.

"By all means, proceed," Alvin chuckled encouragingly. "I hope you're not squeamish," he nastily added to Savage, who snickered.

I pretended to ignore them and stalked fearlessly towards Toothless. Suddenly recognizing me, he pounced on me and pinned me to the ground. I could hear the Outcasts' gasps as Toothless licked me over and over.

"Yeah, I'm happy to see you too, bud," I quietly told him as he continued to flick his tongue over my face. "Maybe they taste their prey before they eat it," I could hear Alvin comment curiously, and I laughed under my breath. "We can catch up later, Toothless," I said, "but for now, just play along."

He had a clear question in his eyes, but he nodded, willing to put it off until later. I leaped to my feet and put my arms in front of me defensively. "You can't defeat me, you dirty lizard!" I loudly proclaimed, and Toothless reared up and flapped his wings convincingly.

The Outcasts were exclaiming and gasping in awe. As Toothless conveniently drove me toward the boulder under which I had stashed his riding gear, spreading his wings so Alvin couldn't see, I ducked under the rock and hastily pulled out the saddle and stirrup.

As quickly as I could, I attached the riding gear securely to Toothless' back and side. To do this, he had to remain still for a few seconds. I caught sight of the suspicion in Alvin's eyes as I took a quick peek at him over Toothless' shoulder.

"What're ya doing, boy?" he demanded. I finally finished securing the saddle and jumped aboard Toothless' back. Instantly, I felt a sudden surge of courage.

Toothless and I were together again. We could do anything.

"I'm not the Dragon Conqueror!" I yelled at him. "I'm the Dragon Trainer!" And with that, I clicked the stirrup, and Toothless went rocketing up into the air with all the speed he was known for.

It was just as I remembered it. Flying on the back of my best friend, in control, once again the master of the skies. "Great thunder of Thor!" roared Alvin. "Fire them catapults!"

Although the men were pretty good shots, they had underestimated Toothless' speed. He deftly dodged every single boulder, and then fired his own projectiles back at them. The blue fire blasts took down the catapults with the deafening noise of fire crackling and wood splintering.

But during my attack, I failed to realize that one of the Outcast soldiers had fired three crossbow bolts at me, and I only saw the deadly points of the flintstone-tipped arrows when it was too late. The bolts whistled loudly as they flew straight for us, the sound heralding our own doom " "

And then a searing bolt of blinding white fire shot directly in front of us, vaporizing the crossbow bolts. Skin crawling after the close shave, I looked in the direction of the fire blast, and saw myself staring into the reluctant face of a grumpy Rilebolt.

My heart leapt as my friends flew into formation with me – the same formation in which we had flown all that time ago, during the trust exercise. "What took you all so long?" I asked, a smile finding its way onto my face. "Why?" asked Astrid with a similar smile. "Did you miss us?"

We dove as one, down toward the battle. I saw another ship cross into what was rapidly becoming a battlefield, and this ship carried my father and his best men. "We have to get closer!" I yelled, and we increased our speed.

Stoick's ship fired huge boulders from their own catapults, crushing several Outcasts. "Shoot them dragons down!" screamed Alvin, and released the waiting rock in the only remaining catapult.

He tried to aim for Toothless and I, but in his haste, fired the boulder the wrong way. Astrid saw the rock coming, and reflexively sent Stormfly into a roll. The Nadder panicked and rolled in the opposite direction – the boulder missed by millimeters, but Astrid was thrown off balance and onto the deck of Alvin's ship.

I dove, but was met with a hail of more crossbow bolts. I caught a glance at Alvin's arm wrapped protectively around his hostage, and fury threatened to engulf me. "Hold your fire!" I yelled through clenched teeth.

Snotlout didn't listen, and Hookfang fired a stream at the water in front of the Outcast boat. "What did I just tell you?" I roared at him, and he glanced at me with a mix of fright and confusion. "I heard you say fire!" he protested.

"He's right!" called Stoick. "Aim at the water!" I looked at the water perplexedly, and saw that my dad was indeed correct. Already, there was a thin blanket of steam covering Alvin's ship. "You heard him!" I yelled. "Fire at the water!"

We dove, once again, as one. All the dragons fired their blasts at the water, throwing a huge cloud of hot steam into the air. The twins got the finishing blow, adding Barf's gas to the mix and then lighting it with Belch's sparks. A colossal explosion rocked the boat, completely enveloping it in a thick, obscuring cloud of ash and vapor.

Everything then happened at once. Unable to see, Alvin's soldiers were firing at nothing. Stoick's ship slammed into theirs, the metallic blade on the front slicing through its hull. With the Outcasts thrown completely off balance, Astrid managed to escape and run to the stern. Alvin turned around, only to see Fishlegs and Meatlug bearing down on him. He was roughly tackled to the ground, and got up in time to see them vanish into the steam blanket.

I pulled Toothless up as we approached the stern of Alvin's ship. Astrid hastily climbed up behind me and wrapped her arms securely around my waist. "Thank you," she said in my ear, and kissed me

soundly on the cheek. My heart swelled, and we took off again before Alvin could possibly react.

Stoick had somehow gotten on deck, engaging in a brief duel with Alvin. The Outcast leader was using an anchor as a weapon, holding on to the rope attached as he relentlessly kept up the attacks. But he got careless, and the anchor dug into the figurehead of his ship. It split away from the boat, and Alvin was dragged down into the water with it.

"Finish them!" I cried, not willing to let this chance go. Gobber pulled on the oars, steering the Berk ship out of range. Ruff and Tuff dove down, coaxing Barf to cover the Outcasts with gas. As the green cloud settled over the deck of their ship and started to get into their lungs, Stormfly fired a single shot at the ship.

The explosion that followed was cataclysmic, instantly blowing the ship into fragments and killing almost all of the Outcasts. Even from way up in the air, I felt the shockwaves from the colossal blast.

Toothless and I wheeled in a celebratory flight, and behind me, Astrid laughed delightedly. My friends were all grinning over our victory.

We all landed on the dock of the ship. Luckily, it was big enough and sturdy enough to support the dragons. "What were you thinking, handing yourself over to Alvin?" Stoick demanded to me. I honestly replied, "I thought that if Toothless and I were together again, we could make things right."

His gaze softened, and he nodded. I found hope for the first time in almost two weeks.

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(Batwings' POV)

It had taken me a while to find Nightshade. When I had, the sound of the explosion in the distance told me that it was all over. I soared back to the beach where I had seen Hiccup and saw a very satisfying sight indeed.

Two Outcasts were trudging out of the water, away from the smoking ruins of their once-battle-worthy (and even sea-worthy) ship. They were Alvin and Savage. Unable to resist the temptation to add insult to their already deep injuries, Nightshade and I landed in front of them.

"YOU!" bellowed Alvin, instantly catching sight of me. He started forward, and I smugly opened my mouth.

Out from my mouth came a song so powerful and so beautiful, it instantly blasted Savage into unconsciousness and made Alvin drop to his knees. "Thisâ€¦ isn'tâ€¦ overâ€¦" he whispered, and then fell onto the beach, fast asleep.

I stopped singing, out of breath. That song had been unlike any of my others â€" not soft and soothing, but loud and powerful. Chuckling, I got back onto Nightshade, nuzzled her briefly, and took off toward

Berk.

-.--.-.-.

(Alvin's POV)

My dreams were full of Berk warriors aboard boats and Viking teenagers riding dragons. But I was far from intimidated. Instead of defeat, I sensed an opportunity. In my dream, I made a decision that would change the rest of my life.

"When I'm done with themâ€¦ we will ride dragons too."

-.--.-.-.

It's funny how an attack by your greatest enemy can change things overnight. I set out to prove that our dragons would never hurt us.

What they provedâ€¦ was that they would protect us, with their lives.

-.--.-.-.

**A beautiful ending, but there's a sting in the tale â€" Mildew strikes again, getting rid of Batwings' evidence. But what goes around eventually comes around, rightâ€¦?*

**By the way, what did you think of Fungus' POV?*

**And like I said earlier, could someone think of a good title for the second part of the next episode?*

**Review please, and wait for the next chapter!*

26. Portrait of Hiccup and Batwings

I admit it, this is probably my least favorite episode of "Riders of Berk". However, I was inspired to add this by a certain writer on this site, so a big thanks to you.

Aniul6: I won't write all the episodes â€" this fanfic can only be so long, after all. But Legend of the Boneknapper will definitely be included.

-.--.-.-.

Measuring up to a Viking father isn't easy. Especially when that Viking father is also the chief of your village.

So when you get a chance to prove your worth â€" you jump on it.

-.--.-.-.

Great Hall (Hiccup's POV)

A full month after the battle with the Outcasts, or the Battle of

Hel's Shores as some called it, my father decided to do what every Viking chief before him had done. Him and I were to have our portraits painted together and hung in the Great Hall.

I was elated at the news. And I was holding onto the feeling as Stoick and I stood ramrod-straight in front of Bucket's easel as he worked with his paints. In my hand, I held a shield, and Stoick had a hand on my shoulder and a sword in his other hand.

"Shoulders back and chin up, son!" my dad told me, and as I did so, he added, "This portrait's going to hang in this hall forever! Chief Stoick the Vast and his son Hiccup the Dragon Trainer! This will be a painting that history will remember."

Oh yes – since I was the first Viking ever to train a dragon, and also because I had ended the 300-year-long war, it was only fitting that a dragon should be in the picture as well. I had instantly opted for Toothless, but as it turned out, he was too fidgety to stand still while Bucket did his work. So, that was how Stoick and I had ended up surrounded by the long, eel-like body of Batwings, with his tail curled around us, his wings spread majestically on either side, and his head bent down next to mine.

Bucket suddenly stood up from his easel, muttering to himself, and walked up to us. I looked on in bewilderment as he brushed dust off of Stoick's shoulder pad and straightened my shield. "I can't do this!" he wailed in frustration, and furiously pounded his head against a nearby pillar. "OK, I'm good now," he added, suddenly calm again.

"Uh, Dad," I murmured, "I've never seen Bucket like this." Stoick chuckled and told me, "Well, after he lost half his brain, he became an artist." I knew this already, but Batwings apparently didn't.

"So he can paint?" he asked, glancing toward Stoick without moving his head. "He's the best of the best," Stoick responded. "He's going to do us proud – this portrait will take its place alongside all the other portraits of past chiefs and their sons."

He pointed to the last one in line. "That is the only picture of me and my own father," he said softly. "It was a great day." I thought I heard him choke up a little, but then he glanced down at me and reprimanded, "Chest out, son."

I took a breath and expanded my chest, but then let out the breath in a huff. "Yeah, this is about as out as it goes," I told him sheepishly. He nodded and said, "Well, that's fair enough then."

-.-.-.-.-

****Hours Later****

That night, as all the adult Vikings had their meals, my friends and I clustered around the portraits in the Great Hall. I kept a modest distance back, not very interested but still obligated to take a look. Astrid was by my side with a hand on my shoulder. These days, ever since I had saved her from the Outcasts' clutches, she seemed to want to be with me more and more. Not that I minded.

Fishlegs had his excited face on again, and the twins were up close to the paintings, admiring them. Batwings was also there, observing the old chiefs with great interest. Snotlout and Snaketail looked bored.

"Look at all these great leaders," Astrid told me, voice full of wonder. "And tomorrow morning, you're going to be joining them." I just smiled to myself and blushed faintly. I didn't feel like a leader, despite the fact that (most of) my friends looked up to me as one.

One of the exceptions was currently snickering. "There goes the neighborhood," Snotlout snorted to himself, although we all heard it. "You're part of an elite group, my friend," said Snaketail kindly, this time without the flirtatious grin and wink that usually accompanied such a remark.

"And one of the few who wasn't killed by the successor," claimed Fishlegs, who seemed ready to launch into a lecture about that very subject. "So far," Tuffnut said with a chuckle.

"I guess it is a big deal," I said, the first words I had spoken tonight in the Great Hall. "It's likeâ€| being a part of history, isn't it?" agreed Batwings, clapping me on the back.

"A history of goofballs," Snotlout said pointing to one painting, which showed a young blonde Viking and his impressive father. "That's Hamish the First," Fishlegs instantly replied, "our richest and most revered leader, and his son Hamish the Second."

Snotlout clearly didn't take the lecture seriously. "I'm Hamish the First," he mocked in a high-pitched, snarky voice. "Bow down before me and kiss my pointy shoes!" The twins got down on all fours and pretended to do just that, and then shoved him to the ground, laughing hysterically.

Then the portrait of the real Hamish fell down on Snotlout's head, prompting another string of giggles from Ruff. "Look what you did to the Hamishes!" squealed Fishlegs, who frantically picked it back up and hung it on its proper place on the wall.

But as he did so, a single sheet of parchment fluttered down from its hiding place on the back of the painting. "What's that? It's probably mine," Tuffnut said, making a grab for it, but Snotlout beat him to it.

"It looks like some kind of map," he said with a grin, which quickly disappeared. "With poetry," he added, making a noise of disgust.

A hand flew out from nowhere and took the map. "I'll take tha'," said Gobber, ripping it out of Snotlout's grasp. "All o' these were supposed to be destroyed."

Astrid looked at him skeptically. "Why? What's so special about it?" Gobber held it out of her reach as he replied, "Many men lost their limbs, their lives, and their minds tryin' ta find that treasure."

We all looked at him perplexedly, when Fishlegs piped up again. "Ooh, I read about this! It's the Treasure of Hamish the First â€" his son

buried him with it and left this map. They say the clues are so complicated, that only a brilliant mind could decipher them."

Gobber nodded wisely. "Tha's the truth. Stoick and I even went after this treasure. It lured us up into the mountains in a blinding snowstorm. We fought like badgers over the clues â€" we were lucky ta make it back alive, and with our friendship intact ta boot."

He met our awed gazes with a grim one. "Fer your own good, kids," he warned, "ferget yeh ever saw this." He then limped off with the map, leaving a hushed silence behind.

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****Morning****

The entire village had turned up to watch the revealing of Bucket's painting. Batwings and I were up front with Bucket and my dad, and my other friends were at the front of the gathered crowd. The painting was sitting on the easel, covered with a purple silk cloth. My heart was beating with anticipation.

This painting would tell subsequent generations of Vikings the history that my dad and I had helped to make. It would tell them that Stoick the Vast and his runt of a Dragon Trainer made peace, and strong bonds, with the feared flying reptiles. Needless to say, the crowd was absolutely buzzing with excitement. My friends looked the most excited of all.

"Here it comes, son," Stoick said gesturing toward the hidden painting. "This is our legacy." My eyes widened and a smile spread across my face.

Bucket grabbed the silk. He paused.

He pulled, revealing the painting in all its glory.

And I instantly knew that something was very, very wrong indeed.

First of all, I looked about seventy pounds heavier, and more muscular than Snotlout.

Second of all, Stoick and I didn't have our sword and shield at our sides â€" they were raised, ready for combat. We both had determined, courageous looks on our faces.

And finally, Batwings was coiled tightly around us, eyes red and demonic, his tongue out in a snake-like hiss and an expression of hatred and evil twisting his features.

The crowd loved it, but I was absolutely appalled. Batwings' eyes were wide, as if he was unable to take any of this in. _That's not me,_ his face said.

Feelings mutual, I thought numbly, looking at how exaggeratedly muscular Bucket had portrayed me. "What happened to Hiccup?" Tuffnut asked in the distance, clearly confused. "Who cares?" replied Ruff with a dreamy sigh.

"Um, Bucket?" I began uncertainly. "Why am I so" â€" I trailed off, searching for a word â€" "like that?" I finished. Batwings just opened and closed his mouth like a fish, stunned speechless.

"Why is the sky blue?" Bucket responded. "Why do I have a bucket on me head? We'll never know the answers." Stoick walked up with a mug of ale in his fist. "You did a brilliant job, Bucket!" he enthused. "Don't you think so, son?"

I looked at him with pained eyes. "That's not me in that painting," I murmured, hardly able to speak. "Sure it is," he assured me. "You know, just bigger and stronger."

Mulch walked up and offered his opinion â€" "Now that's the son of a chief," he said cheerily, clanking his mug with Stoick's.

Just then, to everyone's shock, a crimson blast of fire struck the painting, causing it to topple off the easel. As the crowd watched the paint and wood fall victim to the hungry flames, I looked over in the direction it had come from.

Sure enough, it was Batwings. His claws were clenched in angry fists, his fangs were out, and he wore an expression more hateful than anything Bucket could recreate. The scar wrapping around his neck, and the one inflicted by Alvin's hatchet, glowed grotesquely in the light of the flames.

"What in the name of Odin?" demanded Stoick. "How could you do such a thing to a portrait of you and your friend Hiccup?" Batwing glared at him with such intensity that even the mighty chief backed away.

"I have no friends," he growled. "Only enemies I haven't killed yet." With those ominous words, he took off, flying out of the Great Hall and leaving many disturbed faces behind.

There was nothing to do but watch the invincible flames devour the wood until nothing but ashes remained. The fire burned for five minutes after that before finally dying down to nothing.

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****Berk Village****

I had left the adults in the Great Hall soon after that. I was disgusted, worried, and just plain upset as I wandered through the village. I even trekked up to the highest point on the island, where Mildew and â€" unbeknownst to him â€" Nightshade lived.

My common sense told me not to seek Batwings out. Although hardly anything was known about Sirens' attitudes, I decided to avoid tangling with an angry dragon â€" especially one whose flame could burn for minutes on end on barren rock and whose venom could cause endless pain.

I smiled to myself as Fungus walked up to me, bleating a welcome. I patted the sheep's head and gave him a bit of clover. Although Mildew's disposition left something to be desired, his pet was nice enough.

Eventually, I felt a fist connect with my shoulder. I looked up and saw Astrid walking along beside me, an expression of worry creasing her face. I just sighed and kept walking, this time with her in tow.

"I can't believe it," I finally said when we were strolling through the village. "My dad likes that portrait more than he likes the real me! I meanâ€¦ even my name! You know that it's Viking tradition to name the runt of the litter 'Hiccup'."

I gazed sadly at a flock of sheep being led by a Viking, with the smallest one lagging behind somewhat. "Come on, little Hiccup," he told it, and when he looked up and saw me, said sheepishly, "Oh, hello Hiccup."

I felt even worse. "What do I have to do to get my father to accept me?" I muttered to myself. I mean â€" defeating the Red Death and making peace with the dragons, wasn't that enough?

"He does accept you," Astrid said soothingly, putting her hand on my shoulder. "He just accepts the painting more." I scoffed and said, "Thank you for summing that up."

She sighed and turned me around to look her in the eye. "Look at it this way," she said calmly. "_I_ accept you, just the way you are." I smiled and hugged her as she gently pressed her lips against mine.

We kept walking, with my spirits having risen somewhat. _At least someone likes me the way I am,_ I thought. _If only Dad would see that._

Then, something caught my attention. Glancing over in the direction of Gobber's forge, I caught sight of Fishlegs standing out in front of it. Curious, the two of us walked over. As we got closer, I saw a strained, nervous look on his face. "What are you doing here, Fishlegs?" I asked, half-curious, half-suspicious.

"Nothing!" he replied, a little too quickly. Then he turned his head to the side and made a few bird calls in what looked like the direction of the forge. "Ca-caw, ca-caw!" he called, several times.

I sighed. "OK, where are the rest of them?" Astrid asked, crossing her arms. Fishlegs didn't reply, so we walked around to the back of the forge.

Sure enough, there were the twins and Snotlout staring expectantly at the window, and soon enough, Snaketail came crawling out. "I've got the map, and we're finding that treasure," she told us smugly, not startled in the least to see us. "And you," she added menacingly to Fishlegs, "are a horrible lookout."

Astrid scowled at the girl â€" they had maintained their rivalry even though Snaketail no longer seemed to be interested in me anymore. "You heard what Gobber said," she told her. "The bravest warriors in history have died trying to find that treasure."

Snotlout looked at her smugly. "Yeah, and I'm next." She scoffed and said, "Well I, personally, want to live to see another

Snoggletog."

Fishlegs turned to her and I, excitement making his eyes bulge. "We'll be legends!" he said. "Bards will sing songs about us!" She got up in his face and spat, "You'll be _dead_! Come on, guys, not even Stoick could find it."

I had mostly been hanging back in the argument until those words were spoken. A brilliant and crazy plan suddenly popped into my head. "You're right, he couldn't!" I said, more to myself than anyone else. "Give me that map," I added, tearing it from Snotlout's hands.

"Finally, someone's making sense," Astrid said in approval. I smirked over the page at her before going back to reading it. "Alright, were do we start?" I asked Fishlegs and Snaketail. Astrid facepalmed and asked me, "Are you serious?"

I put away the map and looked at her seriously. "Think about it, Astrid. My father couldn't find that treasure. What would he say if I did something that not even Stoick the Vast could do?"

She sighed. "You're going to go after this no matter what I say, right?" she asked. "So you're not going to give me a hard time about this?" I responded, allowing a hint of amusement to enter my voice.

"No," she replied smartly, "because I'm not going with you. It's your choice whether or not to go after this 'legendary treasure', and I respect that. But I'm staying behind to find Batwings and comfort him. He needs to know that not everyone sees him as a monster to be slain, and I think that even if you weren't leaving, I'd be the best person for the job."

I nodded. "I understand," I told her, hugging her tightly. "This isn't the last time we'll see each other, don't worry." Astrid hugged me back. "I'll worry all right," she replied, "but I know that you'll make it back."

That brought my first genuine smile of the afternoon.

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(Astrid's POV)

I watched as Hiccup and the others mounted their dragons and flew off toward the Great Hall, presumably to start looking for clues near Hamish's portrait. Sighing with worry, I walked off to my house, where Arachne was feeding Stormfly and Rilebolt.

"Hey, sister!" she called cheerfully. "Where's Hiccup and the rest?" I hesitated, then told her all about the map, the father-son-dragon portrait, and Hiccup's plan.

Arachne wasn't looking so cheerful when I was finished the story. "Wow," she said, giving her Skrill another carp. "It must be hard being the son of a chief." I rolled my eyes and responded, "Tell me about it. I was going to go find Batwings and try and make him feel better. Come with me?"

My sister thought about it, then agreed. "Sure," she said. "I'm sure Rilebolt would rather do that than go on another quest with Toothless." Her dragon shrieked in agreement, getting to her feet.

I boarded Stormfly, and the two of us took off to start looking for the poor, angry Siren. _I just hope he's not angry enough to bite first and ask questions later,_ I thought, shuddering.

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****Great Hall (Hiccup's POV)****

"_Where the land meets the sea, in the crook of the master's knee, that's where your search will be_," recited Snaketail, reading from the map. "What does that mean?"

Tuffnut repeatedly hit his head in answer. "Think think think. Think think think. â€|I forgot what I was thinking about."

We were all bent over the map, trying to figure it out. "I think I've seen this before," I murmured, walking up to the row of portraits on the wall. "See, right there!"

I pointed to Hamish the First. His foot was up on a rock, and his knee pointed to a weird-looking rock spire jutting out from the rock behind him. "There, where his knee bends!" I exclaimed. "That's where we start looking."

A few minutes later, we guided our dragons down to one of the beaches. On this beach, there was a spectacular view of the water, and in particular, the same rock spire that was featured in the painting.

"OK guys, listen up," I told them, unrolling the map and reading aloud the next clue. "_From here you will see a sea that's been sown, look to where water turns to bone_."

Snotlout leaned on Hookfang's horn, bored. "'Turns to bone'?" he asked. "Hamish isn't even trying to make sense." I shook my head. "No, it'sâ€| he says 'water turns to bone'â€| He must mean ice!" I suddenly burst out.

"The glacier!" Snaketail crowed, pointing to a distant mountain of ice. With our next destination clear, we urged our dragons back into the sky and across the sea, toward the titanic iceberg.

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****(Stoick's POV)****

"What?!" I exclaimed, outraged. "You had that map and didn't destroy it?" Gobber just looked at me resignedly and sighed. "I know, I know," he said. "I'm an idiot."

I shook my head. "What were you thinking?" I demanded. Gobber shifted his feet and responded, "I was just thinking that you and I should take another crack at finding that treasure."

I couldn't believe I was hearing this from him. "Gobber," I said warningly. "We turned back too early!" he protested. "So we lost a coupla toesâ€¦" I stood up and slashed my hand through the air to silence him. "Come on," I ordered. "We have to find Hiccup and the others before they get themselves killed. Why would they do such a thingâ€¦?"

Muttering to myself, I walked off. I didn't see Gobber glance guiltily at the portrait of Hiccup and I hanging on the wall behind him.

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****Glacier (Hiccup's POV)****

Everyone around me stared in awe at our surroundings. The walls and floor of the cavern were made purely of ice, and we could see more than one Viking frozen for all of eternity in it.

"There's something down there!" I said suddenly, catching sight of a small object buried in the floor. "That guy saw it too," muttered Fishlegs, pointing to a frozen Viking nearby.

"_Call on Magni, you'll go astray. Freya, though, will show the way_, " I read some more from the map. "Oh, I get it," said Snotlout. He bent down over the object and began to bang his helmeted head against the ice, causing it to fracture.

There was a sudden *click*. "No!" I cried, suddenly getting the feeling that this was a trap. I pulled Snotlout away from the cracked ice just in time to avoid a massive, clawed mace that swung down from nowhere and smashed itself into the wall right next to us.

"We can't break the ice," I said, panting slightly. "That's what 'Magni' means. He's the god of strength." Fishlegs snapped his fingers. "Of course! And Freya is the goddess of fire!"

I rolled up the map and stood back up, helping Snotlout to his feet. "Then that's exactly what we're going to use." I looked up to where Toothless was perched and called, "You know what to do, bud."

He roared and hopped down from the icy ledge. I pointed to the frozen object and encouraged, "Do your thing, Toothless." The Night Fury gave a delighted gurgle and shot a stream of blue fire at the ice, rapidly melting a hole.

I gasped slightly as I picked up the burning object. It looked like some kind of symbol, with parts on the sides which made it seem like it would fit together with something. "That's the treasure?" asked Ruff, bending down over my shoulder to see. "No," I replied, "but it might help lead us to it."

Tuff took the metallic key â€" was it a key of some sort? â€" and held it at arm's length. "Take us to the treasure," he commanded it. "Let me know if it answers," Snaketail sneered, taking it back and handing it to me.

"This is just the first piece" â€" but just then, there was a loud rumble and a strange hissing sound, and the glacier started to shake.

Big chunks of ice began to fall from the ceiling, and huge crevasses split the floor into a jigsaw puzzle. "Toothless!" I cried, and the Night Fury obediently jumped over to me. I mounted him and fit my leg in the stirrup.

We took flight immediately, and Toothless roared to the other dragons, who were waiting outside. They all flew in, not stopping or slowing down for even a second as their riders all clambered onto their backs and steered them out of the collapsing iceberg.

Safely back in the sky, my friends and I headed for stable ground. I took a deep breath through my nose and let it out with a satisfying huff. _One step closer to the treasure, and one step closer to proving myself,_ I thought.

Perhaps if I wasn't so focused on what lay ahead, I might have heard the signature whispering of a certain serpentine dragon as she and her rider burrowed out from the glacier and flew off in a different direction.

-.--.-.-.

****Berk Island (Stoick's POV)****

Gobber and I braced ourselves as the Thunderdrum landed heavily on the beach. We were still unused to riding a dragon, but I for one was rapidly getting used to it.

The Thunderdrum was my dragon, a feisty water demon that Hiccup and I had encountered in the weeks following the Outcast attack. Initially, the two of us had been wary of each other, and with good reason â€" the Thunderdrum could potentially blow my head off with its roar, and I hadn't known how to properly treat a dragon back then.

But after the Thunderdrum escaped and fled back to its wounded mate â€" for whom it had been wrecking boats and stealing fish â€" I realized that the creature wasn't so bad. We had bonded, at last feeling the trust between Viking and dragon, just in time to beat back a sounder of wild boars that had come to scavenge the dying Thunderdrum.

"Night Fury tracks," noted Gobber, bending down to examine the heavy dragon prints. He gathered some of the sand and loudly sniffed at it. "They were hereâ€" about an hour ago."

I blinked. "I'll never understand how you do that," I said, bewildered once more at this skill of his. "What does 'an hour ago' smell like?" Gobber gave me a glance and said simply, "Not as strong as a half hour ago."

All of a sudden, there was an immense cracking sound, and we turned toward the ocean to see some of the glacier crumble into the sea. "The kids must have found something," I muttered, almost impressed.

"It was in the glacier," Gobber crowed. "I knew it!" I snorted at this and retorted, "Oh, you knew it? Then how come we spent a week digging in the sand?" Gobber scowled. "Tha' was yer idea!"

I forced my temper down and instead murmured, "Hiccup and his friends

got farther in one afternoon than we did in a month." The blacksmith pulled up his pants and said, "Yep, looks like the little Hiccup's got the best of us. And we think we're the big, strong Vikings."

I tilted my head, not seeing his point. "Stoick, it's the painting," Gobber said plainly. "Of course," I murmured after a second of thought.

The Thunderdrum roared, causing us both to look up and see a hissing, spine-covered serpent flying in a peculiar twisting motion in the distance. "An' Batwings?" Gobber asked me rhetorically.

I had no idea what the Siren's intentions were, but Hiccup's were clear as ice. He wanted to prove himself worthy of being my son. He wanted to show me that brains were better than brawn.

And he might be right, I caught myself thinking.

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Might as well stop it there, I've been feeling depressed lately and not in the mood for writing.

Sorry, but I'm not going to be writing "How to Pick Your Dragon" for this fanfic, as you can probably tell by now.

And yes, a group of wild boars is called a sounder. Then there's a drove of pigs, a team of hogs, a litter of piglets, and a singular of swine. I'm not making any of this up.

One last thing â€" why do you think Nightshade and Batwings collapsed the iceberg? Was it an accident or with malicious intent?

Stay frosty (pun intended) for the next chapter!

27. Treasure of Acceptance

Thank you to Ferdoos for suggesting this title. You're awesome.

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Sky Over the Sea (Hiccup's POV)

We perched on our favorite rock spire, taking a short rest to make up for the chaos that we had just went through. We always went here with our dragons if I had a flying lesson planned for the Academy, or we wanted to race, or just for us and our dragons to relax.

"_At the edge of the world, amidst the raging sea, in the serpent's mouth lies another key_" I read from Hamish's map. "Ugh, serpents!" exclaimed Tuffnut. "I hate serpents." Belch shot him a glare as Ruff told him, "You do realize that you're sitting on one, right?" Tuff's eyes brightened and said, "Oh, yeah. Serpents are awesome."

Snotlout suddenly pointed into the distance. "That cloud looks like a serpent," he said excitedly. "And in a few minutes it'll look like a

kitten," Snaketail reprimanded him.

I peered into the distance, near where Snotlout had indicated. "He might be on to something," I muttered. "In the mouthâ€¦ lies the keyâ€¦ Over there!" I pointed in a slightly different direction.

Everyone gasped. In the distance was a long, winding rock formation that sat on top of the water, and at the end was a cavern that looked like the mouth of a gigantic snake. "Isn't that Jormungandr's Nest?" Snaketail asked nervously. Fishlegs squeaked, "The cave named after Thor's archenemy?"

I nodded. "That must be where the next key is. Fishlegs, you come with me. We might need Meatlug's small wingspan to help us navigate the cave."

He gulped, but didn't protest.

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****Jormungandr's Nest****

Toothless, Fishlegs, Meatlug, and I all stepped nervously into the tunnel beyond the serpent's mouth, which extended deep into the bowels of the stone monster. Thanks to tiny, numerous holes in the walls and ceiling, sunlight was able to filter in and provide a dim illumination.

"Do we really need that treasure?" Fishlegs asked, voice echoing slightly. "Isn't our friendship treasure enough?" I ignored him and walked deeper into the cave.

The tunnel came to a dead end, with a small metallic piece sitting innocently near the wall. I picked it up and whisper-shouted, "Got it!" Fishlegs nodded and turned back toward the exit, eager to get out.

But something made him stop. "Um, Hiccup?" he asked nervously, pointing a shaky finger at the ground. I glanced down toward the wall where the key had sat against and paled. There in the shadows were three large eggs sitting in a pile of dried seaweed.

"We need to get out of here," I breathed, already running for the exit. As we neared the end of the sea cave, I could hear faint cries coming from the distance, carried by the wind. _Our friends,_ I realized. _They're calling us. But why?_

Then as we approached the exit, a huge, serpentine figure blocked our way. I gasped â€" it was a huge blue-green Scauldron. It hissed ferociously, livid at us intruding upon its nest. Fishlegs screamed and rapidly boarded Meatlug. I did the same with Toothless, and we flew over the Scauldron's head just as it fired its boiling water at us.

We left the water dragon behind as it roared threateningly at us. "How's that for a Hiccup?" I said to myself as we joined our friends.

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****Berk Woods****

The map seemed to lead into the woods, so we went there after a small debate. "They fit together," I said, connecting the two pieces we had so far. "What are you going to do with your part of the treasure?" Ruff asked curiously.

"I'm not really here for the treasure," I told her, and she looked disappointed with my answer. "Great, I get his share," Snotlout said instantly. I rolled my eyes and grinned to myself.

Our journey came to a halt as we walked out of the woods and toward a strange rock wall that blocked our way. A section of the wall appeared to be made up blocks of all shapes and sizes. Even though it was out in the middle of the woods, it didn't look natural.

"Why would anyone build a wall in the middle of the forest?" Snaketail asked, only to be met with shrugs. "Duh, to keep out the other trees," smirked Tuff.

I picked up the map again and recited, "_The world is right, the stars align, when not in sync, danger you'll find_." Snotlout protested, "Stars? I'm not waiting until after dark."

Looking over the riddle one more time, I put the map away. "He doesn't mean actual stars," I told him thoughtfully. "I mean, water didn't turn to bone." Snaketail nudged me from Horrorcow's neck and asked, "What do you think it means?"

Snotlout piped up again. "Hey, why are you asking him? Maybe I know!" He glared at us imperiously as everyone quieted and looked at him skeptically. After a few moments of tense silence, he continued, flustered. "I said maybe! As it turns out, I really don't." I just growled to myself and turned back to the wall.

"There are shapes carved into the walls," noted Fishlegs, dismounting Meatlug and walking up to it. "Keep an eye out for anything that looks like a star," I said, and got an immediate response from Snaketail. "Found one!" she sang, pulling on the block. But the second she did, the wall trembled violently until she pushed it back.

"It says 'in sync'," I murmured. "That means there must be another one." We looked for a few seconds, before Fishlegs found it slightly higher up the wall. "We need to pull them out at the same time," I said, before calling, "Ruff, Tuff?"

When I didn't get an answer except for Tuff's grunt of pain, I turned around to look at them. "I said harder! I want to see stars," Tuff complained, before his sister slugged him in the jaw. He smiled dazedly.

"Guys!" I called, louder this time. When I had gotten their attention, I brought them up to speed on what they were supposed to do. Nodding as one, the twins instructed Barf and Belch to pull out the two blocks.

The blocks came out, and the wall trembled again. But this time, it split into two halves that slid into the stone on either side of it,

revealing the entrance to a cavern. Without any more delay, we all walked inside. But the second we were through, the entrance closed behind us.

That doesn't look good, I thought, before reluctantly walking deeper into the cave. We'd gotten this far, and now there seemed to be no turning back.

Our walking took us into a tunnel, and then into a vast cavern. In the centre of the cave, there was a shallow pit with six pedestals rising from it, each containing a key. They were all identically shaped, but seemed to be made of different materials.

There was one other thing about the cavern â€" it was sweltering hot. "Ugh, is anyone else warm?" asked Snotlout. "I know," replied Tuff. "I'm sweating like a dragon at an eel convention."

Snaketail shifted her feet. "Is it just me, or is the floor moving?" she asked hesitantly. I lowered my torch to the pit, and the light revealed hundreds of tiny, lizard-sized dragons covering the floor. "That's why it's so hot in here," gasped Fishlegs. "Fireworm dragons!"

Tuffnut grinned as he picked one up. "Careful!" I warned. "Their skin burns hotter than the sun." He scoffed in reponse, "Please, how hot can the sun be?"

The Fireworm that he picked up suddenly glowed red-hot. There was a sick sizzling sound, and Tuff cried out in pain and dropped the dragon. The rest of the few hundred Fireworms began to glow.

I frantically shook two off of my foot before they could burn through the boot. Toothless shot his blue fire at the dragons, and they began to panic and scatter. The other dragons copied his action, spreading their fire around and scaring the Fireworms away.

In a few seconds, they were gone. But the room was now filled with leaping flames, so I knew that I had to work fast. I stepped into the middle of the now-clear pit, Toothless by my side. "Grab everything and let's go!" Snotlout yelled.

"No!" I yelled back. "It's a choice â€" _Something pure and something strong, look first to yourself and you won't go wrong_."

I looked around at the six choices. Each key was made of a different material. "Something strongâ€" that must be the one made of iron!" called Fishlegs, pointing to a shiny grey key. "But iron isn't pure," Snaketail argued, "take the gold one!" She gestured to a radiant gold key.

The Fireworm dragons started to come back with a vengeance. The dragons doubled their efforts to keep them away, but soon ran out of fire. The Fireworms crawled through the gaps in the fires and advanced. "We're getting roasted alive!" shouted Snaketail. "You might want to make a decision now!"

I ignored her, glancing frantically at two in particular that caught my eye â€" a diamond key and a copper one. Diamonds were both pure and strong, but something about the copper caught my eye. "Look first to yourselfâ€" I muttered, then cautiously lifted up the

copper.

Nothing happened. No traps or hidden weapons activated.

But there was one thing that did happen â€" the Fireworms collectively fled and disappeared for good.

Then there was a sudden tremor and the same hissing sound from the glacier, accompanied by the sound of grinding stone. The floor cracked, then fell out from underneath us. "Hiccup!" Fishlegs screeched, holding out a futile hand as I fell into the blackness below.

I hit the ground hard as rocks continued to fall around me. But soon, the tremors subsided and the ceiling above became clogged with boulders. "We've got to find some way out of here, bud," I told Toothless, painfully sitting up. "Give us some light, please," I added.

Toothless shot a fire blast at a stray boulder, causing it to glow red. The light allowed me to see what was in front of me â€" a circular pattern carved into the ground, with a small section cut away in the middle.

"I wonderâ€¦" I said quietly, taking out the three pieces of key. I fit them all together with clean clicking sounds, and then put them into the small indent. At first nothing happened, but then a section of the far wall opened up with a slight grinding sound.

"We've come this far," I told a reluctant Toothless, who shrugged and followed me out of the cavern and into the tunnel beyond.

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****Berk Woods (Astrid's POV)****

"Hey, I see something down there!" called Arachne, and steered Rilebolt down. Stormfly and I were on their tail, and soon landed on the grass beside them.

The Skrill shrieked and managed a strange gait, running on her small hind legs and flapping her large wings to balance herself. Stormfly ran, significantly more comfortably, after her, deeper into the forest.

The journey ended at the base of a huge rock formation jutting up from the forest floor like a small mountain. I noticed that it looked partially collapsed, with large rocks loosely piled together on one slope. Then I saw Fishlegs and the rest hastily throwing the rocks aside as if digging for something buried underneath.

"What's going on?" I asked, hastily running over to them. My heart suddenly sank when everyone turned to me and Arachne with panicked expressions on their faces. "Hiccupâ€¦" I breathed, already rushing to help.

He is NOT dead, I told myself. _If he is, I'll kill him._

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****Cavern (Hiccup's POV)****

The tunnel ended up leading to a gigantic pit that went down so far, I couldn't see the bottom. In the middle of the pit rose an island of sorts, and there was a narrow walkway extending from the tunnel in which I stood all the way to the island.

I walked hesitantly down the path with Toothless at my heels. On the edge of the island, I stopped and took a small scroll from the pedestal on which it was secured. "_This treasure was passed from father to son_", I read. "_I leave it to you, the next worthy one. For only a Hiccup could have gotten this far â€" from one to the other, be proud of who you are_." My spirits rose as I re-read the rhyme.

I unrolled the scroll and stared in amazement at what it showed. On it was a sketch of Hamish the First and his son â€" drawn, I was sure, by Hamish the Second himself. But there was one major difference between the sketch on the scroll and the painting in the Great Hall â€" Hamish the Second was small and scrawny, just like me. The sketch was signed, "Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Second".

I couldn't believe my eyes. "Hamish the Second was like me," I told Toothless ecstatically. "He knew only another one of us could find this place." Toothless grunted and nudged me with his head affectionately.

Then, unexpectedly, a voice rang out and echoed in the vast cavern. "Says who?" it called, and I turned to look up at the source. Perched on a rocky outcropping above the tunnel I had entered from was Batwings.

"What are you doing here?" I asked in shock. He flew over and landed beside me. The ground trembled, and Nightshade burrowed up through the floor to join us. "The same thing you're doing here," he said calmly, but with a note of menace in his voice. "If I found Hamish's treasure, maybe people wouldn't view me as a bloodthirsty killer any more. So I memorized the map that Gobber took and followed the clues."

It dawned on me just then. "So it was you and Nightshade that caused the glacier and the cavern floor to collapse!" He shrugged and scraped two of his claws together sheepishly. "Sorry about that," he apologized. "I didn't mean to bring the place down on you all."

I walked up to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Batwings," I said, "no one thinks of you as a bloodthirsty killer. I'm sure the only reason my dad portrayed you that way was to make me look bigger and braver." He just shrugged and looked away, clearly uncomfortable.

"But look at all this stuff!" I said, just noticing what else was on the island. Piles of gold bars and statues and even some rare gemstones littered the floor. It was hard to fathom that all this once belonged to one Viking.

"I guess being a Hiccup isn't a bad thing after all," I commented. "Who said it was a bad thing?" asked Batwings, putting his claw on my

shoulder this time. I just smiled and said nothing.

But then, two more pedestals rose up from the floor " one had a hammer, and the other had a feather. "I guess Hamish II really liked pedestals," I said, "and riddles." For just then, I noticed another riddle on the ground by my feet.

"_In between the body and mind_," read Batwings, "_a choice must be made on what you find. At this moment, you must look to yourself, as only one path will give you true wealth_."

I groaned in frustration. But all of a sudden, the tunnel behind us began to collapse, apparently weakened by Nightshade's tunneling. Then the rock bridge began to give as well, and to top that all off, the cavern itself was caving in on itself. "Come on, Hamish, you're killing me!" I growled. "Nightshade says she's sorry," Batwings put in after the Whispering Death hissed guiltily.

I looked from one pedestal to the other. Should I pick the hammer or the feather? Was it better to fight my way out, or to flee and hope I made it?

The cave ceiling was breaking up, sending more and more rocks plummeting down. It felt like we were standing in the middle of an earthquake as I frantically tried to make up my mind.

The tremors increased in magnitude, and the cave began to quicken its own destruction. Batwings glanced at me and said, "You'll make it, I know!" I nodded and replied, "Save yourself." He leapt onto Nightshade's back, and she burrowed out of sight.

Finally, I made a decision. I bolted toward one of the pedestals, just as the cavern ceiling collapsed completely, bringing a ton of rock onto our heads

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****Berk Woods (Astrid's POV)****

"Keep digging!" I cried, not slowing down one bit as I shoved rock after rock aside. It seemed as if the more rocks I moved, the more that appeared beneath it. But I knew I couldn't slow down. Hiccup's life depended on how fast we dug through the rubble.

Just then, there was a massive earthquake. We fearfully looked around, wondering what had caused the sudden tremor. I happened to look backwards, and I gasped loudly at what I saw " an entire section of the forest was sinking and falling into the ground, the ground itself simply falling into an abyss below.

"Hiccup!" I breathed, already running to the edge of the rapidly-forming pit. Dust was thrown up into the air, and we all coughed and squinted our eyes shut as we tried to stop it from entering our lungs.

The dust cleared, and as the earthquake died down, I could hear the sound of something rising. There was a clicking sound as whatever it was stopped. I peered through the remainder of the dust, and tears of relief welled up in my eyes.

There was Hiccup and Toothless, looking perfectly alright. In one hand, he held a scroll, and in the other he held a feather.

I rushed to him and threw my arms around his neck gratefully. He returned the hug just as enthusiastically as I closed my eyes and let joy fill my heart again.

Then we separated and I slugged him in the shoulder. "That's for almost getting yourself killed," I said roughly as he flinched and grabbed his wounded arm. He gave me his most pitiful look, then broke into an amused smile. We both knew what was coming next.

I hugged him again, this time pushing my face against his and deeply kissing him. We held our embrace for ten whole seconds before he pulled away from me. But we didn't let go of each other just yet.

"That's forâ€¦ you knowâ€¦" I murmured, blushing a little. "Everything else?" he asked sarcastically. I grinned and replied softly, "You know it." I kissed him again, just as long and just as passionate as before.

We broke apart slowly and reluctantly. "What happened down there?" Arachne asked excitedly. "Yes, tell us please!" Fishlegs exclaimed, hopping up and down uncontrollably. "Blah blah blah, who cares?" Snotlout interrupted. "Where's the treasure?" Snaketail agreed with him.

I looked curiously at Hiccup as he unrolled the scroll he was carrying. "This is Hamish the First's real son," he told us as we looked at the sketch in surprise and awe. "His real name was Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Second."

Fishlegs squealed, babbling his happiness in rapid sentences. I took a look at the parchment for myself and punched Hiccup lightly on the shoulder. "Wow, now we know why you're Hiccup the Third." Ruffnut said bluntly, "That's not treasure."

I pointed up to the sky, where two large Vikings on an even larger dragon could be seen heading this way. "To a father, it might be," I said, almost to myself. Hiccup grinned and ran to greet Stoick.

There was a small, sudden tremor, and then Nightshade erupted from the dirt with Batwings in tow. "Here, this might be more satisfying," he told Ruff, gesturing to Nightshade. She dutifully held up her tail, revealing a sparkling gold ring with a diamond embedded in it hanging on the end of one of her spines. "We managed to make off with that before the rest of the treasure was lost."

Snotlout looked heartbroken. "You mean there was more?!" he said, voice cracking. "Ooh, I want to see!" Snaketail enthused, pulling the ring off Nightshade's tail and gazing at it. I saw her eyes slide mischievously in Tuffnut's direction, who was also looking at the ring.

I suddenly knew what she was planning to do with the ornament and knocked it out of her hands. "Come on, Snaketail," I said harshly. "This isn't yours. Batwings found it, so he gets to decide what to do with it." I picked the ring out of the dirt and handed it to the

Siren.

The sun, I then noticed, was low in the sky. I let a smile stretch across my face as Hiccup and his father briefly embraced.

Then, we mounted our dragons and flew back for home. It had been a long, tiring, suspenseful day.

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****Great Hall (Hiccup's POV)****

I watched with great satisfaction as Bucket took down the old portrait of me, Stoick, and Batwings. I simply thought that he was getting rid of it, and nothing more.

Oh, how wrong I was. To my surprise, he reached down and hung a brand-new one on the wall in its place. I looked at it and broke into an overjoyed smile.

In the painting, Stoick was grinning down at me with a hand on my shoulder. Instead of a sword, I had a scroll in my hands. My old helmet was on, and I was delighted to say that I looked just as skinny as usual. Batwings was coiled in an affectionate way around us, his maw tweaking upwards in a toothy grin and his wings framing the two of us magnificently.

I felt my dad's hand reach up to rest on my shoulder. I looked up, and he looked down. It was then that he gave me a smile that I would treasure for the rest of my life.

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I spent most of my life trying to prove to my dad that I could be his kind of Viking.

As it turns outâ€¦ I already was.

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****Nope, not my favorite episode, but at least I was able to twist it to suit my OCs.****

****Speaking of which, any ideas as to what the fate of Batwings' ring is going to be? I already have an idea myself, but I'd like to hear what you're thinking. Also, a cookie to anyone who can guess what Snaketail wanted it for.****

****Anyway, I managed to get this chapter done a lot quicker than I thought. I've been writing non-stop, trying to get my mind off of recent events that have conspired in my life. Looks like it's working.****

****R+R please, and I will see you for the next episode (I'll give you the benefit of the doubt) â€" "Dragon Flower"!****

28. Dragon Flower

****Love this episode. I find it funny and sinister at the same time**

â€" funny because, obviously, it's Hiccup and friends. Sinister because it's the dragons' closest shave with death so far.**

Howeverâ€| we are officially halfway done this fanfic! Yes, we still have another 28 chapters of "Legends are Born" to get through!

Also â€" possible name for Part 2, anyone?

-.-.-.-.-..

Berk is a small island in the middle of nowhere. So when we get a taste of something new, we tend to go a littleâ€| overboard.

Unfortunately, new isn't always good.

-.-.-.-.-..

Docks

"Trader Johann's here!" called Bucket from his fishing boat, beside himself with excitement. I heard the shouts of the other Vikings and curiously looked out my window. Indeed, there seemed to be a trade ship pulling up at the docks, and everyone on Berk was being drawn to it like metal to Stoick's magic rock.

I soon joined my friends in line, waiting for Johann to finish anchoring. At last, the foreign trader heaved a plank of wood over his shoulder and put it over the side of his ship, allowing us to step aboard.

"Ahh, Berk!" he exclaimed. "My favorite of all the islands I travel to. Oh, the things I've seen, the people I've met! I'd need a week to tell you, but avast, we have limited time to conduct our business together."

He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted for all of us to hear, "Whatever it is you're looking for, I can assure you that you'll find it here!" With that, we all filed onto the ship and began to browse. "Dibs! I call dibs on everything," Snotlout said, jumping aboard and looking around wildly.

"I've got food of all sorts," Johann informed us. "Spices, exotic animals, works of art and jewelry! Not to mention knowledge."

I watched as Fishlegs picked up a book, looking like he was going to wet himself with excitement. "Is this your only book on botany?" he asked. Johann gave him an amused look and replied, "Yes, given to me by the author himself!"

My friend reached into his pocket and pulled out a small necklace. "How about this? It's made with dragons' teeth," he offered, and Johann laughed. "Fair enough, Mr. Fishlegs!" The trader took it gleefully and Fishlegs scampered off.

"Wow, I'm even better looking than I thought," said Snotlout, admiring himself in a dusty hand mirror. "You sure you want that?"

taunted Astrid while she expertly handled a mace. "I could have sworn I just saw a crack appear in it." He gave her a confused look, which soon turned to an insulted one. She smirked as I walked up beside her, trying to hold in my laughter.

"Are you OK, Gobber?" I asked the blacksmith as he held up a large piece of silk. "I'm better than okay," he sighed. "I'm in Valhalla!" I rolled my eyes, and then something caught my eye. _Perfect!_ I thought, picking up the little bottle.

"Ah, that's pure squid ink, Hiccup!" Johann told me. "Wrestled from the colossal kraken of the northern waters." I rummaged in my pocket and pulled out one of my homemade spyglasses. "How about this?" I asked him.

"No thanks, you've already given me five! Unfortunately, I only have two eyes," Johann chuckled. I thought, then dug out something else. "What do you think of this winch?" I offered him, turning it playfully. "It'll help you pull up your gangplank."

The trader looked honestly delighted. "A working tool for an old man's ailing shoulder! Consider it done." He walked off to put the winch away.

I turned to my dad, who was sparring with Batwings with two swords that they had found. Obviously, the Siren was losing. "I could use one of these!" Batwings told me as he hastily parried Stoick's next strike. "I've always wanted to practice my swordplay."

I rolled my eyes at Stoick next, and he laughed as he knocked Batwings' weapon out of his claw. "If you must know," he said, reading my mind, "it's not for me. I'm heading off to my yearly meeting with the chief of the Hysteric tribe. The last one to come without a gift left without a head."

He walked off to converse with Johann, who gave him the sword without asking a price. "You're always welcome on the shores of Berk," Stoick bellowed heartily. "I'll be back in five days" "Hel, I'll be back in two, thanks to Thornado." He mounted his waiting Thunderdrum, adjusting the saddle that I had made for him a short while ago.

"Thornado, huh?" I asked him. "You finally named him!" Stoick struggled with the water dragon, who was bucking and thrashing, eager to get going. "That's right!" he grunted. "Because he has the power of Thor and the ferocity of a tornado! It's the only thing he'll listen to, because he can be quite stubborn!"

I laughed as he finally got Thornado under control. "I can't imagine where he gets that from," I teased. My dad urged the Thunderdrum up, who soared into the sky with a mighty howl, stingray-like tail thrashing.

"Ah, men riding dragons!" Johann admired from the sidelines. "What a magnificent sight. I wonder if" "Johann!" came the hostile voice, and I narrowed my eyes at the sight of the old man and his sheep.

"Mildew!" Johann greeted him warmly. "Did you bring what I want?" he demanded, getting right to the point. Johann pointed him toward two

large baskets sitting off to the side of the ship. "I assume you've brought my cabbage?" the trader asked in return, and Mildew handed him the vegetables.

Johann pulled a wandering Terrible Terror from his baskets. "Feisty little one, aren't you?" he asked in frustration, pulling the little dragon away. Toothless, at my side as always, growled and pounced on Johann, who yelped, "Safe distance, please!"

Gently but firmly, I pushed Toothless away from the frightened trader. "Sorry about that, he's just protective," I explained, then happened to glance down at the floor. My bottle of ink had been smashed in Toothless' attack.

"Sorry, lad, but that was my last one," Johann said regretfully. "Tell you what, I'll find that kraken again and wrestle you another bottle, free of charge." I nodded and sighed, picking up a fragment of the bottle. Toothless just gurgled a guilty apology.

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****Arena****

"How does that look?" Tuff asked, shoving the statue into the middle of the floor. "Beautiful," agreed Ruff. Trader Johann had left yesterday, and we were overdue for a lesson in the Berk Dragon Academy. But now as we watched, the twins had hauled a massive stone sculpture to stand in the arena.

"You got that just for the Academy?" I asked Tuffnut, impressed. "Yeah, we got it from Trader Johann. We had to give him our great-grandfather's skull, but we got to keep the ashes."

I walked around and patted the statue thoughtfully. "You know, it's about time you guys started taking some pride in this place." Tuffnut nodded distractedly, then said, "Duck!"

I barely had time to do that before Ruffnut urged Barf and Belch to spit their fire at the statue, blasting it into the far wall. "That was awesome!" cheered Snaketail. "I wanna take a shot!" She clambered onto Horrorcow's head and urged her to spit a fireball at the statue. Stormfly was next, with each of the spines she shot hitting it dead on. Meatlug added to the statue's torture by blasting it with her own fire, knocking all the spines off.

Batwings looked very amused by all the commotion. Even Toothless got in the action, but his fire blast missed by a few feet. Toothless looked shocked â€" obviously, he hadn't meant to shoot just then.

The Night Fury wiped his paw over his face and sniffled, before inhaling deeply and firing another blast with a roar. Snotlout barely got his head out of the way in time. "Hey, tell your dragon to close his mouth when he sneezes!" he shouted.

"That's weird," I muttered. "I'm sorry, but that's never happened before." Toothless looked at me awkwardly, fidgeting and half-closing his eyes. He let loose with another sneeze, accidentally blasting Fishlegs' helmet off of his head.

I was sure that it was just a little cold that had him down, or all the dust and ash flying around from the smoldering statue. But I had a nagging feeling that something was off.

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****Berk Village****

I went later that day for a little flight with Astrid. She had challenged me to a race around Berk â€" first to fly twice around the entire island would be the winner. So far, she was in the lead, something I hoped to remedy by the time we had completed the second lap.

Just for fun, we circled thrice around the peak of the mountain where the Great Hall was located, the peeled away and over the village. We were about twenty meters up in the air when I looked down in response to an unfamiliar flash of blue on the ground. Growing in clusters around the village were several bushes with stunning blue flowers adorning them.

"Look at those flowers!" exclaimed Astrid, pointing out a particularly large bush. But it was just then that Toothless reared back in flight and sneezed violently, blasting the ground and setting a section alight. I yelled as Toothless suddenly began flapping his wings erratically, coming in for a hard landing on the ground and throwing me off of his back.

"Toothless, you okay, bud?" I asked him as he slumped to the ground. "Toothless?" I repeated with new urgency. He only looked up at me with tired eyes and warbled unhappily. "Maybe he has the flu or something," I muttered as Astrid walked up to help me examine him. "Do dragons get sick?" she asked, just before a roar shattered the afternoon tranquility.

We looked over to see a Terror whiz over the head of a Blundertail, slamming into the ground and letting out a fiery sneeze that sent a shudder through its little body. "Whatever it is, he's got it too," I said, picking up the little dragon. "And him," Astrid pointed out, as the massive Blundertail roared again and fell on its side, breathing heavily.

The nagging feeling that had started bugging me earlier started up again. _Something isn't right here,_ my instincts told me â€" but I chose to ignore them. My only worry was getting Toothless home safely.

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****Hiccup's House (Batwings' POV)****

I watched from my perch in the rafters as Hiccup made Toothless as comfortable as possible on the living room floor. The poor Night Fury was shivering uncontrollably with cold and looked like he had been on the receiving end of one of my lullabies. Hiccup had moved him to the heat of the fire blazing in the middle of the room in order to keep him warm. Occasionally, the dragon would sneeze and set a part of the wall or floor on fire, which would be hastily put out by Hiccup.

Upon seeing the sick dragon, I had scrambled up into the rafters as fast as I could. If one dragon could come home sick, I knew that it could possibly spread. And since dragons hardly ever got sick, getting the flu was one thing I didn't want to experience.

"This should fix 'im right up!" Gobber said cheerily, taking a boiling cauldron of some foul-smelling liquid off the spit resting above the fire. I made a face at the smell and held my nose. "What the Hel is that?" I asked with a lisp.

"It's best not ta ask," Gobber replied, setting down the pot in front of Toothless. "Whatever ya do, don't" â€" Toothless sneezed again, blasting the pot and sending its scalding, disgusting contents flying everywhere. A significant amount got on Gobber's shirt and pants. "Well, tha's ruined," he muttered. "I'll never get that yak ta vomit again."

There was a frantic banging on the door. Giving Toothless a wide berth, I hung upside down by my talons from the rafters and opened the door. It was Astrid, who looked bedraggled as if she had gotten here in quite a hurry. She blinked in surprise at the sight of me answering the door upside-down, and frantically turned to Hiccup.

"You've got to see this!" she panted. "Come on, at the plaza! It's the other dragons!"

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****Berk Village (Hiccup's POV)****

I had never seen such a sight. Several dragons were lurching around in the sky, clearly not in control of their flight. Hookfang and Snotlout looked like they were having the most trouble, as the big Nightmare flapped crazily through the air like a drunk seagull. "Easy, easy!" cautioned Snotlout, just before Hookfang's wing caught onto one of the central torches and commenced spinning them around.

Barf and Belch spun wildly before glancing off the top of a house and plummeting to the ground, taking their riders with them. Horrorcow and Nightshade were similarly ailed, with Horrorcow slamming her head into another house and slumping to the ground as if struck dead. Nightshade, jaws rattling loudly, dropped like a rock and plowed her face into the ground, losing strength rapidly. When her body was halfway below the earth, she gave up and pulled herself out, coiling up haphazardly.

"Hiccup, help!" screamed Fishlegs, sitting aboard Meatlug. The Gronckle was spinning like a top, looking absolutely exhausted. "I think she's sick! And that I'm about to beâ€"|" he added, clamping a hand around his mouth and burping.

All of the teenagers were tired, disheveled, and worried. "It's spreading to all the dragons," I worried. "Gobber, what can we do to fix this?"

The blacksmith looked thoughtful for a second, and then his face brightened. "Goathi! She'll know what ta do!" He limped off to get

the elder.

An hour later, Goathi was knelt beside Toothless, examining him from every angle. She calmly pried his mouth open and looked inside, expression crinkling into one of deep thought. Of all the people on Berk, Goathi seemed the least changed from a life of dragons as enemies to allies. For her, it seemed, life went on, regardless of who was friends with whom. Not a word ever came out of her mouth, but she looked at dragons with the same indifference as ever.

Scratching her head, Goathi picked up a cluster of chicken bones, shook them, and threw them across the floor. She gazed at them, trying to read the pattern in which they fell. "I've heard Goathi can tell when you're going to die just by looking at your fingernails," Astrid murmured, and Fishlegs abruptly hid his hands behind his back.

"That's jus' an old wives' tale," Gobber said dismissively. "She looks at yer tongue." Fishlegs covered his mouth next.

Goathi hobbled over to retrieve her staff, and began scribbling in the dirt-board we had set up for her. "She says the dragons are reacting ta something," translated Gobber. "Like they're allergic." I glanced up from my position next to Toothless. "Allergic to what?" I asked.

Goathi kept scribbling. Gobber squinted and read out slowly, "To aâ€| mooseâ€| wearin' boots. Shouldn't be too hard ta find." The elder whacked him in the face with her staff with a scowl.

Gobber winced and rubbed his jaw before trying again. "They're allergic ta somethin' new that's just come to the island!" he said in realization, then muttered, "I still think tha' looks like a moose." Goathi whacked him again.

"There are a lot of new things on the island," Batwings said, yawning. "Trader Johann was just here, wasn't he?"

Goathi quickly erased the dirt-board and started anew. "She says ta get rid o' everything," Gobber said grimly. "Otherwise, things are just gonna get worse. The dragons are gonna get sicker."

Batwings gulped. I patted Toothless as he gave a quiet moan. There was only one thing to do, and that was to do what Goathi dictated. If she thought something new was afflicting the dragons, then we were going to have to find it.

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****Berk Woods****

"I know this is hard, guys, but you're doing a good thing," I assured the long line of Vikings. Everyone was lining up to through Trader Johann's items into a large pit in order to keep them away from the dragons. Although the villagers were definitely disappointed to throw their new items away, they loved the dragons enough to do whatever it took to help them.

So far, two days had passed since Johann had come. It seemed as if every dragon on the island was being affected by this mysterious

sickness. I was worried â€" if they didn't get better soon, they could die, and that was something I didn't want to happen.

"Goodbye, beautiful," Snotlout sniffed to his mirror, before throwing it in the pit with everything else. "This was disappointing," Snaketail sighed, tossing in her new hairbrush. "So long," Batwings muttered to his sword.

"What are you doing?" came Ruffnut's demanding voice. "Throw it in!" She was standing next to Fishlegs, who was furiously flipping through his little book. "This botany book is a real page-turner!" he protested. "I have to know how it ends!" With a grunt, Ruffnut tore the book from his grasp and flung it into the pit. Fishlegs let out a sob as if he had just lost his best friend.

"I don't see you throwing anything in," I told Gobber warningly, "and I thought I saw you buy something from Johann." He looked uncomfortable as Astrid piled on, "He did! I saw him buy some silk."

I gave him my hardest glare. "Hand it over, Gobber," I commanded. Now he looked even more uncomfortable. "Uh, no," he stammered. "Can't do tha', Hiccup. It's, uh, currently in use. It's me skivvies! And they're _gloooooorious_."

Now both Astrid and I were glaring. "Fine," he sighed, walking behind a boulder. Two seconds later, a silken pair of purple underpants went flying out and into the pit. Gobber trudged out, pulling up his pants and whistling cheerfully.

"I could have gone my entire life without seeing that," I muttered. Astrid winced and nodded.

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****Hiccup's House****

I woke up the next morning with a yawn. I had slept well that evening, knowing that we had gotten rid of everything from Johann. I thought that the dragons would at least be a little better by now.

"Hey, why don't we go out flying," I suggested to Toothless, who was sleeping in his usual spot. "Maybe it'll make you feel better." The Night Fury glanced up and made an expression like he was about to be sick. He opened his jaws wide, and I only had enough time to duck before he blasted the wall behind me with a sneeze.

Frowning, I left him alone. Walking down the stairs, I passed Batwings, who was curled up in the rafters. "Can't even check on Nightshade," he muttered miserably, and I felt a stab of pity before I walked outside.

I decided to go to Astrid's house and see if she was home. I found her outside tending to Stormfly as Arachne did the same to Rilebolt. "Poor girl," Astrid muttered. "Can't get comfortable, huh?" She looked in my direction, gazing at me with sad eyes. I sighed and went to help her comfort Stormfly.

Suddenly a streak of white flame blasted a barrel to smithereens,

just missing us. We looked over at Arachne, who was muttering to a guilty-looking Rilebolt. The Skrill let out a low warble as she scratched exhaustedly at the ground with her wing claws.

The three of us went to see Fishlegs. He was in his room, massaging Meatlug's feet. "Once upon a time, there was a little princess named Meatlug," Fishlegs recited without noticing us. "She was the most beautiful dragon in all the land. People would come for miles to" â€" he was interrupted by a huge burp from Meatlug's jaws.

"I-It's okay," assured Fishlegs. "It doesn't smell that bad!" He rushed out of the room, past us and outside to get some fresh air.

We followed suit.

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****Berk Village****

"We got rid of everything from Trader Johann," Arachne said as we gathered by the plaza a few minutes later. "But our dragons aren't getting better, they're getting worse!" She looked close to tears, and Snaketail looked the same as she hugged the unmoving Grounder by her feet.

"L-Let's make a list," I said nervously, counting on my fingers. "Maybe there's someone who bought something and hasn't thrown it into the pit yet." Snotlout, who was slumped against Hookfang, seethed in anger. "If I find out who's holding back, I'm going to be so mad! Hookfang was so sick last night, I spent two hours scraping dragon barf off the walls!"

Tuffnut spoke up solemnly. "Yeah?" he said. "Well ours is dead!"

Astrid gasped loudly and my eyes bugged. _Whatâ€|?_ I thought, my mind numb.

"Nah, just kidding," Tuff amended, looking slightly guilty. "But they really aren't that fun anymore." Ruffnut nudged Barf's head with her foot and added, "They just sit there and won't blow anything up!"

There was a sudden roar, and we looked over to see Stoick and Thornado landing in the plaza. "Son!" he called. "Put this in the book of dragons â€" 'Never fly on a stomach full of undercooked mutton.' The Shivering Shores will never be the sameâ€|"

He and Thornado came over. I didn't bother pushing the Thunderdrum away from the sick dragons â€" he'd catch the illness eventually. "What is it, Hiccup?" Stoick asked, suddenly taking note of the unmoving dragons. "What's wrong with everyone?"

I burst out, "It's the dragons, dad. They're sick, and getting worse." Astrid nodded and clutched my hand fearfully.

"Every dragon?" Stoick asked, bewildered and shocked at the same time. "Well, almost every dragon," I told him. "Batwings seems fine, and" â€"

"Hiccup! Stoick! Everyone!" Gobber called, waving his hook and running from the direction of the house. "Yeh've gotta see this!"

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****Hiccup's House****

We entered the dim room to see something that froze us in our tracks.

Batwings was hanging from the rafters with what looked like the last of his strength, weakly digging his talons into the wood in a final, desperate attempt to hold on. His face was deathly pale, and his eyes were almost fully closed with exhaustion. At the sight of us, the Siren held out a hand weakly, only to drop to the floor with a sickening thud.

Even Snotlout looked sick with worry. Batwings shapeshifted, growing to his full size as he coiled up in a futile attempt to get comfortable. I moaned with despair, seeing my friend like this.

As the Siren shapeshifted again in his delirium, now thrashing sluggishly as Gobber picked him up, my heart felt as heavy as lead.

What can we do?

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****Ooh, another worrying cliffhanger! Even Batwings isn't safe from the terrible plagueâ€¦ But is there a dragon that is?****

****I'm sure most of you know the answer to that, but I'm leaving it here nevertheless.****

****I've got two more things to say before I leave to write the next chapter â€" "Stoick's magic rock" is a HTTYD book reference, and a new dragon will star in the next chapter alongside the Scauldron.****

****Review please, and stay tuned for the next thrilling chapter!****

29. Healing Venom

****Three more chapters. Three more chapters to go. Then I can finally write what I had been looking forward to writing ever since the episode came out â€" my favorite part of the canon HTTYD storyline.****

****Also, I finally took a look at the rumored HTTYD 2 pictures over at the Dreamworks Wiki. I'm going to come right out and say it â€" I'm not sure what to think of the sequel. I love the idea of another HTTYD movie, and I'm glad the Skrill's going to appear (hopefully), but Hiccup just looks... I don't know. I guess it's just weird to see the lovable, bumbling teenager as an 18-19 year old.****

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****Hiccup's House****

"Poor guy," Stoick muttered sympathetically as he crouched over Toothless that night. Batwings was near him, moaning softly as he shapeshifted several times every few minutes. It didn't look like he was in control of his abilities in this state.

"What do you think happened?" he asked me. "I-I don't know," I stuttered. "Goathi says that they're allergic to something new to the island, but we think we've gotten rid of everything!"

Stoick mulled that over. "Well, if the dragons aren't getting better," he began, pushing Batwings' tail out of his way as the Siren shifted again for the hundredth time that evening. "Then there must be something still out there that's making them sick," I concluded, close to a breakdown. What had we missed? What more could we do to help the dragons get better?

Suddenly, there was a pained roar that echoed in from outside. "Thornado?" Stoick and I said simultaneously, already up on our feet.

We rushed out the door, into the chilly night air, and toward the back of the house. When we got there, the Thunderdrum was sprawled out on the ground tiredly. He opened his gigantic maw and a colossal sneeze erupted from it, blasting the helmet from Stoick's head and causing the house to creak.

"Sneezing," I muttered. "That's the first symptom." My father looked befuddled. "But he was fine when we got back!" he protested helplessly, gazing worriedly down at his dragon.

"Maybe you should retrace your steps," I told him, and he nodded.

The journey didn't take long " it ended on the other side of the plaza. My friends were all with me, minus Batwings, who was in no condition to go anywhere, and Arachne, who was already in bed.

"Well, this is where we landed," Stoick told us, looking around. "Alright," I said, "keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary."

We all gazed out at the village for a few seconds. It was Fishlegs who first spoke up. "How's that for unusual?" he asked, pointing. We looked in that direction and saw the twins crouch onto all fours, then leap at each other, their helmets clashing with a loud clang. "I'm seeing stars," muttered Ruff. "No way, me too!" Tuff replied excitedly.

"No, nothing strange there," Snaketail muttered.

But then, my eyes and ears were drawn to a sudden noise over in the distance. Beyond Ruff and Tuff, a small Terrible Terror was sniffing at a cluster of bushes decorated with blue flowers.

We walked over to investigate the strange plant. The leaves were broad and covered the entire plant. The flowers were bright blue, darkening to purple at the edges, with five petals and a white centre. "Does anyone recall seeing this flower here at all?" I asked, picking one for everyone to see.

Fishlegs jumped up and down, raising his hand. "It looks an awful lot like a Blue Oleander," he said, taking the flower. "I recognize the size and petal design from my botany book, its supposed to have a plus four in attractiveness and" â€" I rapidly cut him off before he got started. "Do you remember anything specific?"

He thought, and then a frightened expression spread across his face. "Only that they're poisonous to reptiles," he gulped. "Which means poisonous to dragons!" I concluded. "This is seriousâ€" did your book say anything about a cure?"

Throwing away the flower, Fishlegs replied sourly, "I don't know, because somebody made me throw it in a pit and" â€" "Well then you'd better go dig it up again!" I ordered impatiently, talking over him. With a nod, he rushed off.

"I don't understand," Astrid said. "Where did these flowers even come from?" There was silence, and then â€" "Mildew?"

We all turned to look at Tuffnut. "I saw him plant them a few days ago," he continued. "And you didn't think that was strange?" Astrid questioned him, advancing on him. Her pale skin against the shadows over her eyes made her face look almost skull-like, and definitely intimidating.

"No!" Tuff shot back. "Yesâ€" Well, maybeâ€" I don't know, quit pressuring me!" he yelled, turning away uncomfortably.

There was a sudden sneeze from Thornado back at the house, one that shook leaves from the Oleander bushes even from this distance. "Then let's go pay the old man a visit, shall we?" Stoick suggested.

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****Mildew's House****

Stoick, Astrid, and I trekked all the way up to Mildew's cabbage farm and found him sulking over his foul-smelling dinner. "So what if I planted a few flowers?" he protested after we interrogated him. "The town square's never looked better. I was merely trying to spread cheer and happiness!"

Astrid glared at him. "Since when do you care about happiness?" she demanded. Fungus appeared at my feet, nudging my leg and bleating. "You did this," I accused, ignoring the sheep for the moment.

"Iâ€" whaâ€" Mildew stuttered, outraged. "I had no inkling, Hiccup, that these flowers had special properties. Now it's no secret that I'm not a friend of the dragons, but on my life, I was not trying to harm them."

That was enough for Stoick. "Let's go, kids," he muttered, shooin' us out. I gave Fungus a quick pat on the head, and then left, closing

the door with a creak behind me.

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****Gobber's Forge****

Fishlegs met us at the forge. We saw him rush up the stairs leading to the lower part of the village, quick despite his large figure, his small book in hand. He paused at the entrance, panting and trying to catch his breath.

"What does the book say?" Snaketail demanded of him. "It says that the Blue Oleander is poisonous to reptiles," he replied, sounding close to tears. "And dragons are reptiles!"

I threw my hands in the air impatiently. "We know, Fishlegs! Was there anything else?"

He was hyperventilating but trying to calm down. Closing the book, he replied, "Not in here!" and pulled out the book of dragons from under his arm. "But the book of dragons mentions a dragon that feeds on the Blue Oleander to supply its poison. It's called the Puff Nadder."

Fishlegs opened the book to give us a good look at the picture of the Puff Nadder. It looked a lot like the Deadly Nadder, but with several differences. Its skin was smooth and slimy like a frog's, and it didn't have an array of horns on its head, instead a pair of fins. It also had a long thin tail with two rigid flaps near the base. Its talons were thick and powerful, and its wings were long and narrow like a fulmar's. All in all, it looked freakishly grotesque.

"The book of dragons also talks about the Scauldron," Fishlegs continued, flipping to the page with the Tidal-class dragon on it. The Scauldron was huge and whale-like, with a round belly and a snaky neck. It had a pelican-like pouch under its jaw, and its wings and tail were fin-like.

"Apparently," continued Fishlegs, "its venom could be mixed with that of the Puff Nadder's to form an antidote, like with snakes and spiders. But the Scauldron has no venom! None!"

There was a sudden, familiar voice that boomed out from the forge. "Tha' book is wrong!" Gobber yelled, emerging from his smithy. "I've dealt with Scauldrons before. They're sixty feet long with razor-sharp teeth! They shoot boilin' water ta melt the flesh of yer bones! The Scauldron has no fear, no morals, but what it does have is lots o' venom!"

The twins walked away resignedly. "I'm out," said Tuffnut. "I'm with him," his sister agreed. "You guys stay here and take care of the dragons," I told them, in a voice that caused Fishlegs to look at me nervously. "What are you going to do?" he asked in a tremulous voice.

"Dad, Gobber, get a boat ready," I told them determinedly. "We're going out to sea to find the Scauldron and the Puff Nadder." Gobber grinned and crossed his arms. "Aye, I thought yeh'd never ask!"

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****Hiccup's House (Batwings' POV)****

I cracked my eyes open at the feel of a hand touching my face. Shifting into my eel form impulsively, my mind struggled to process the information my eyes were giving me. Through the delirium of heat, exhaustion, and weakness, I managed to make out Hiccup standing before me with a book in his hands.

"Look at this," he whispered, showing me the picture in the book. I couldn't make out much through the haze of sickness, but I could see enough to know what kind of dragon it was.

"We're going to get the cure," Hiccup murmured to me. "We'll find that Puff Nadder, give it the flowers, and get some of its poison."

I wanted to warn him. I wanted to say that I'd get better without his help. But in my heart, I knew that I and the other dragons would die if he didn't do it.

Using all my strength, I gave Hiccup a small smile and nod. There was just enough time to see him smile gratefully in return before I sunk into an exhausted unconsciousness.

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****Hel's Gate (Hiccup's POV)****

I was with Stoick, Gobber, Sven, Spitelout, and Mildew aboard a large boat loaded with fish and Blue Oleander flowers. We were just inside the mists of Hel's Gate, where the fog wasn't as bad and with no rock spires present to give us grief.

Unfortunately, no rock spires meant unlimited room for our quarry to roam. And Mildew's attitude wasn't helping.

"This is an outrage!" he protested angrily. "I dug up the flowers, I did my part!" But Stoick wouldn't let it go. "We're here because of you! If we have to put our lives at risk, then so do you!"

Mildew growled deep in his throat and stalked off to the other end of the boat. "Alrighty," Gobber said, walking up to us with a bucket in his hand, "what's the plan?"

Stoick turned to me and gestured for me to come over. "Hiccup, when Gobber and I secure the Scauldron's head, Sven will wedge its jaw open. We'll need you to" â€" I interrupted confidently, "To drain the poison into the bucket. Got it."

I rushed to the edge of the boat and grabbed a sack full of fish. "We're going to need to lure the Scauldron to us with these fish. Hopefully, the Puff Nadder will be looking to swipe them from it, and will come as well. Then we use the Blue Oleanders to feed the dragons and get them to produce that poison."

Reaching into the sack, I pulled out a huge cod and dumped it over the edge of the boat with a loud splash. A few minutes passed before I threw another overboard. Being a fairly good fisherman, I knew that

it could potentially take hours to lure a passing Scauldron to the boat. And there was no guarantee that we'd end up luring other seagoing dragons as well.

Hours crawled by. With one sack empty and another three-quarters full, I was beginning to lose hope that we'd ever find our quarry in the vast sea. "I knew this would never work!" Mildew complained. "This was a stupid idea to begin with!"

My dad laid a hand on my shoulder. "He's not why we're here, Hiccup," he reminded me, sensing my built-up anger at the contemptible old man. "But tha' is," Gobber said, pointing to the water.

I looked over the side, and my stomach did a backflip at what I saw. It was a huge, luminous green shape swimming just below the boat, wings spread to their full impressive length. Its wingspan was longer than the ship itself.

Its tail broke the surface just behind the boat with a rippling, splashing sound. Then three seconds later, its head appeared just above the waves with a whale-like cry. "I may need to change me skivvies again," Gobber muttered nervously. Even Mildew looked frightened.

"We need to lure it on deck!" I cried, spreading fish and flowers everywhere. "Gobber, you secure its neck with this!" Stoick called, tossing him a length of rope. "I'll lasso the horn!" The two burly Vikings ran to the bow of the ship, ready for combat.

But what they weren't ready for was the Scauldron to suddenly disappear. A full minute went by before Gobber asked the obvious. "Where'd it go?" he wondered.

The only reply he got was the screech of a distant seagull.

Just then, the waves erupted about a hundred yards from the ship. It was the blue-green back of the Scauldron, and it threw up a huge spray of seawater as it barreled towards us. "Look out!" Spitelout cried, just before the dragon submerged.

The ship shook from the impact of the Scauldron tackling the boat, actually being thrown into the air a short distance before landing with a mighty crash. The water lashed at the sides of the boat as waves were kicked up from the Scauldron's passage.

Everyone was thrown to the deck. I picked myself up painfully as I saw a serpentine head filled with long, thin, needle-sharp teeth rise from the water to peer at a downed Mildew. It roared, and he screamed, scrambling to his feet and running frantically to the other side of the boat.

The Scauldron rose higher out of the water, clutching the boat with stubby forelimbs. Its weight caused the ship to tip violently, and we all began to lose our balance as the incline increased rapidly. "Hiccup, I gotcha!" cried Gobber, holding onto the stern with his hook and grabbing my hand with the other. I saw Mildew clinging to the mast desperately as my feet suddenly dangled under me.

The fish and flowers were scattered everywhere, which the Scauldron bent its head down to eat. I saw it swallow several fish, snapping up

many of the Oleanders as well. "Now's our chance!" shouted Stoick, and he and Gobber slid down toward the Scauldron. They snagged its horn and neck, pulling it down to the deck. It screeched in reply, its body slipping down into the water as it fought, allowing the boat to right itself again.

The far-away seagull shrieked again, closer this time. But it was only when a dark shape cast its shadow over the boat that I realized that the cry didn't sound exactly like a seagull. It was too loud, too guttural " and then I saw it, perched sideways as its talons clutched the mast. "Puff Nadder!" I cried, pointing up at the dragon.

The beast was a nasty orange color, with its skin shining with slime. Its head fins were bright green, and the yellow, narrow wings were stretched wide to help the dragon balance. In its sideways position, I could easily see the blood-red spikes concealed under its tail flaps.

The Puff Nadder squawked as it shuffled down the mast, bending its head over the mass of Blue Oleander flowers strewn around the deck. It licked its chops as it lunged several times at the plants, gobbling them up like delicious treats.

Meanwhile, the Scauldron had managed to temporarily overpower Stoick and Gobber, retreating back into the water but rapidly being pulled back on deck. "Sven, we need that barrel now!" Stoick ordered, and the Viking rushed over to the Scauldron's snapping jaws.

"I've got the bucket!" I called, tearing my eyes from the feasting Nadder to grab it. "Be careful, son!" Stoick yelled back. "You don't want to get bitten!" I rolled my eyes and replied, "Yes, I know, dad! I'll be dead in twenty-four hours!"

When the dragon opened its mouth to roar, Sven threw the barrel into its maw. The Scauldron growled, unable to close its mouth. "Aha!" Sven exclaimed triumphantly " just in time to hear the barrel shattering as the dragon bit down savagely on it.

Then, with a rush of water, the Scauldron's fan-like tail came out of nowhere and swatted Sven into the air and down into the water, quite a distance from the boat. The tail disappeared momentarily, only to reappear out of the corner of my eye.

"Son, watch out!" Stoick roared suddenly, letting go of his lasso and shoving me aside. The next second, the Scauldron's tail slammed into him, but unlike Sven, he hung on with a grip of iron. The water dragon furiously lashed its tail in an effort to get him off.

While the boat rocked from the repeated impacts, the Puff Nadder was growing more agitated. I saw it finish off most of the fish lying on the deck, eyes glowing a bright yellow and teeth dripping with poison. I abandoned the bucket and instead grabbed the glass jar I had brought with me. Now that it had eaten the Blue Oleander flowers, I planned on harvesting some of its venom into the jar.

Catching sight of me as it gulped down a sea bass, the Puff Nadder growled and let out a short screech. Its eyes rolled back in its head and its head fins quivered and spread out. They flushed a bright pink as a deep croak began to build in its throat " and the louder the

croak got, the more its previously-hidden throat sac swelled. I readied the jar.

When the purple sac was fully inflated, the Puff Nadder released a billowing cloud of toxic gas with a noise like a giant bullfrog. Holding my breath, I plunged into the poisonous mist, scooping some into the jar and tightening the lid. My eyes watered relentlessly as I backed out of the rapidly fading cloud.

Wisps of poison still hung around the boat as the Scauldron continued to struggle. It brought its tail up to the mast, and Stoick, who was still hanging on stubbornly, grabbed the wood, effectively trapping the Scauldron's tail. "I got the tail!" he shouted down to us. Pocketing the filled-up jar, I grabbed the lasso that still dangled from the Scauldron's horn and pulled with all my might.

"Use the mast to wedge his jaw open!" Stoick called, and with enough effort, Gobber and I did just that. The Scauldron's maw was trapped by the thick rod of wood, and Mildew suddenly found himself uncomfortably close to both sets of its thin fangs.

"Grab the bucket!" I told him, struggling hard with the lasso. "Hold on!" he protested. "It's one thing to" "Grab the bucket or I'll throw you overboard!" roared Stoick furiously, hanging onto the mast with all his strength. As we struggled, the Puff Nadder amused itself by tormenting Spitelout.

Suddenly, steam began to hiss out of the Scauldron's jaws. "Take cover!" Gobber yelled as he let go of the rope, grabbed me, and hid us behind a stray shield. Mildew rushed underneath an empty crate as the Scauldron released its boiling water. The scalding hot liquid washed over everything in front of it, but luckily we managed to avoid getting burned.

But now the Scauldron was free, with no one holding it down. With a hiss, it snapped the rope that still curled around its horn and towered over us once more.

Mildew took one look at the incensed serpent and dove back behind his crate. But the Puff Nadder decided to have a little fun with the old man, slashing its talons through the wood and dragging him out. Wrenching himself free from the Nadder's grasp, Mildew panicked and ran, screaming, around the boat like a total lunatic.

The angry Scauldron noticed him instantly and struck. It sank its terrible fangs into Mildew's leg and rear. Mildew howled, the noise startling the Puff Nadder. It screeched and whacked the Scauldron's still-trapped tail with its own. The tip of its tail stung the larger dragon like a hornet's needle, prompting it to fling Stoick away and bash the Nadder in the head. With a squawk, the dragon fell unconscious.

The Scauldron gave us a final, defiant roar before retreating back into the depths. "You can bet tha' the last place he's comin' back to is this ship," Gobber said sadly. "We didn't get the poison," I agreed, holding onto the jar of the Puff Nadder's own venom.

But a sudden, strangled yell from Mildew broke us out of our thoughts. "Never mind, we did," I said, grinning as Mildew clutched at his swollen leg and rear end.

"Get that dragon's poison outta me!" he screamed. "Yer a lucky man, Mildew," Gobber replied. "If we didn't need tha' venom anyways, I'd put ya outta yer misery meself."

I just grinned and held my jar up. Gobber and Stoick gave me nods of impressed approval.

-.--.-.-.

****Gobber's Forge****

We were back from our trip, and now I stood with my friends, waiting. Gobber and Stoick were inside, preparing to extract the venom from inside Mildew. I had already given him the jar of Nadder poison, and the dragon itself was sleeping peacefully beside the forge â€" we were unsure of what to do with it at this point.

"Can you believe we're just standing around waiting for something to come out of Mildew's butt?!" asked Tuffnut, beside himself with mischievous excitement. "Isn't there something smaller you could use?" Mildew's nervous voice came from the forge. "Probably," came Gobber's reply, and the night air was punctuated by Mildew's subsequent scream of pain.

"That's the sound of our dragons getting better," Astrid told me, punching me lightly on the shoulder.

A half hour later, Gobber came limping out of the forge with a strange purplish concoction in a large wooden cup. He had a disgusted expression on his face. "I watched a Nadder's spine slice through a grown man's eyeball like a grape," he told us, voice breaking. "I watched me own hand get devoured by a Blundertail. But never have I ever seen anything as disturbing as tha' old man's bare behind!"

He shuddered as he handed me the cup. "Here, take this to yer dragons. I'm goin' into the forest ta screamâ€|" I held up the cup and called back to him, "Way to take one for the team, Gobber."

The next hour was spent roaming the island with my friends as we sought out all the sick dragons we could and gave them a couple of drops of the antidote â€" Stoick had said that that amount per dragon should suffice. My friends, one by one, stayed behind to look after their own dragons. Finally, I carried the last few drops of potion up to my house, and administered it to Toothless, Batwings, and Thornado.

Crouched over Toothless as I dropped the last of the potion onto his tongue, I looked up as an anxious Stoick stood in the doorway. "Relax, dad," I said quietly. "It's going to be alright."

My dad walked outside once more to check on Thornado. And the second he did, Toothless opened his eyes and stretched tiredly. My heart leapt as he stood up and gurgled happily at me. "Toothless!" I murmured, embracing him around the neck.

When Toothless was feeling fit enough to walk a few seconds later, I led him outside to where my dad was bent over the Thunderdrum. "Dad, they're coming around!" I told him. He turned around, and Toothless warbled at him cheerfully.

Soon, Thornado was on his feet as well. He blasted out a yawn, and in the silence that followed, a slight sound could be heard coming from inside the house. My dad and I exchanged glances before going to investigate.

"WAAA-HOOOOOOO!" came the shout, after we had only taken two steps forward. Batwings shot out of the doors and into the air, spiraling up into the dark sky and cackling joyfully. His laughter rang out over Berk, and my dad and I ended up laughing as well.

Things were indeed looking up.

-.--.-.-.

****Docks****

My friends and their dragons stood by my side as Trader Johann's boat approached. He anchored his ship and hopped onto the dock, a slightly nervous smile on his face. "What is it that moves you to ask for me to come back so soon and so quickly?" he asked with a slight chuckle.

I smiled and motioned the dragon beside me forward. The Puff Nadder croaked as it tilted its head to the side to peer at Johann curiously.

"Trader Johann," I introduced, "meet Sparrowfoot."

-.--.-.-.

A deadly flower, two venomous sea dragons, and Mildew's buttâ€¦ four things I never thought I'd have to deal with in the same day.

But I'll do anything for my dragon.

-.--.-.-.

****So they're all better now! And Johann has a dragon of his own â€" that new duo will definitely be appearing again later in the story.****

****Just want to let you all know that the Puff Nadder wasn't my original idea, it came from the HTTYD books. I justâ€¦ improved it a little. You can view it on my Deviantart page (user: Cm25).****

****Also, a fulmar's a seabird whose name comes from the Norse words for "foul gull". I just thought the analogy was appropriate :)****

****Review please, and look out for the next episode!****

30. Twin-Sanity

****I originally planned to have a lot of fun with chapter, as the original pairing for this fanfic was going to be Hiccup and Ruff. Unfortunately, I backed out of that to make way for Hiccstrid, so now it's just another episode for me to tediously write about.**

Sighâ€|**

Aniul6: I didn't introduce the Scauldron in this chapter â€" more like re-introduced it. It's been a while since Chapter 1.

Matt: Hmm, an angler fish monster with a glowing lure and that rolls into a ball of spikes? Now where have I seen that beforeâ€|? XD

And I've already answered your werewolf question, but I'll do it one more time â€" no werewolves, I find them too overrated in modern society. I prefer faeries and elves when it comes to the supernatural.

Ferdoos: Yeah, I guess that's a habit that developed after the first chapter. Hiccup revealed that Stoick was his dad in the very last sentence, so couldn't refer to him as "Dad" until then. I guess the habit of calling him by his name stuck from there on out.

If you want, I can amend that in the next HTTYD fanfic I'm planning.

-.--.-.-.

They say that two heads are better than one, which is often true.

Four headsâ€| yeah, that's a few heads too many.

-.--.-.-.

Sky Over Berk

"How are we supposed to see in this weather?" Ruffnut's voice came ringing loud and clear in my ears as we flew through the overcast sky â€" or, more accurately, through the clouds themselves. "You're not," I replied, "that's the whole point."

Tuffnut glanced at me confusedly. "Oh. Yeah, I still don't get it." I sighed and explained the lesson again â€" "When you two can't see, you have to trust Barf and Belch to see for you."

The brother of the duo moaned. "Why must he always speak in riddles?!" he said in frustration, voice rising with every syllable. "I say we trust us," Ruff suggested. "Yeah, I'm with you, sister," Tuff agreed. "Belch, down!"

The trouble was, at the same time he said that, Ruff commanded Barf to go up. The Zippleback, unable to go in two directions at once, went into a crazed spiral that sent the twins and dragon on a collision course with the ground.

Fishlegs and Meatlug got in the path of the two, and subsequently crashed into them. Barf and Belch flew off, and the twins and Fishlegs plummeted into a skeletal tree. The branch holding the twins almost immediately started to snap.

Fishlegs saw their danger and gave a sharp whistle to Meatlug. The Gronckle peered down and witnessed Fishlegs give her an odd sort of hand motion â€" he pointed at the twins, then up, and then made a

circular motion with his finger. Meatlug then dove down to retrieve Ruff and Tuff before the branch broke.

"It worked!" I heard him yell distantly. "I can't believe it actually worked!" I steered Toothless down to catch him before his branch snapped off as well.

"What was that hand thing you were doing?" I asked him curiously. "If you must know," Snaketail yelled across from Horrorcow's neck, "Fishlegs and I have been crafting some rudimentary hand signals for Meatlug and Horrorcow just in case we're separated. And it looks like they've been well received." She gave me a winning smirk.

"Hand signals, that's incredible!" I enthused, impressed with my two friends' ingenuity. "Yeah, I know!" Fishlegs said proudly. "Can we work on those in the next lesson?" I grinned and responded, "I don't see why not!"

-.-.-.-.-

****Arena****

I indeed followed through with my promise to Fishlegs â€" the very next day, I gathered the others and told them we'd be practicing Fishlegs and Snaketail's hand signals. Everyone seemed enthusiastic about the idea, and even Snotlout swallowed his pride and praised the two of them eagerly.

"Toothless," I commanded, holding up a hand, "plasma blast!" I pointed a finger downwards and simultaneously threw my shield upwards. The Night Fury annihilated it with his plasma â€" a superheated, explosive substance which I discovered made up a Night Fury's fire. "Good job, bud!" I exclaimed, giving him a fresh fish.

Near Toothless and I, Astrid was practicing with Stormfly and her mate, Spike. Apparently when the dragons had been banished from Berk that horrid week, Stormfly and Spike had been separated. Luckily, just after the last Blue Oleander had been eradicated from Berk, Spike found his way back to the island and took up residence with Stormfly and Rilebolt. He was wary of the Skrill, but enjoyed spending time with Astrid and his mate.

"Stormfly, Spike, spine shot!" Astrid ordered, holding her hands out at arm's length. They both shot a series of spines in opposite directions, syncing their attacks perfectly. The spines dug into the ground in a perfect ring around Astrid. "Better than last time, at least," she murmured, pulling one out from her boot, not seeming to have been injured.

Arachne and Rilebolt were practicing in an area near them. "Riley, lightning!" Arachne said enthusiastically, spreading her arms wide. Rilebolt released a current of electricity through her scales that scorched several nearby objects and caused Arachne's hair to stand on end.

Snotlout's voice carried across the entire arena. "Hookfang, annihilate!" he commanded, pointing at a wooden board. Hookfang launched his fire right at Snotlout, who fortunately was carrying a fire-retardant shield, but was blown into the board with the force of

the blast. "Bulls-eye," Batwings told Hookfang, who growled in pleasure. "Nightshade, burrow!" he added to the Whispering Death, spreading his claws wide and clenching them into a fist. She immediately smashed her jaws into the pavement, rapidly digging a hole in the floor of the arena.

"Meatlug, hug!" Fishlegs told her, wrapping his arms around himself. The Gronckle enthusiastically pounced on him, licking his face repeatedly. Snaketail could then be heard commanding her Grapple Grounder, "Horrorcow, whiplash!" The girl snapped her fingers, and Horrorcow responded with an incredibly loud *crack* from her tail that made us all jump.

"That could actually be useful," I admitted. "Ruff, Tuff, your turn!" The twins nodded and turned to their Zippleback. But they each gave commands that contradicted with another â€" first Barf and Belch accidentally slammed their heads together, and then they did a backflip and crashlanded on their belly.

"What do you think you're doing with my dragon?!" Ruff demanded harshly. "_Your_ dragon?" scoffed Tuff in reply. "Please, you've been breathing in Barf's gas again."

The two went head-to-head. Ruff growled, "How about you stop breathing?" I rapidly stepped in between them and protested, "Guys, Barf and Belch are one dragon! You need to use one signal at a time!"

Ruff nodded and grinned flirtatiously at me until I backed off. "Good idea," she told me with a wink. "Barf, attack Tuffnut!" The right head savagely headbutted Tuff, knocking him into Snotlout. "Uh, I don't think that's what Hiccup meantâ€|" Fishlegs piped up timidly.

Tuffnut got up and ordered, "Belch, eat Ruffnut!" Belch slammed his jaws over Ruff and raised her off the ground. "Come on, guys!" I groaned.

"Belch, drop her," Batwings said sternly, and the male head guiltily put her down. "Ugh, I can't work like this," Ruff said, wiping dragon saliva off of her face. "That's totally unprofessional," Tuff grunted, stalking over.

"I'm taking my dragon and going home," Ruff hissed at him. "You touch that dragon, and I'llâ€|" Tuffnut suddenly faltered. "You'll what?" challenged his sister.

Tuff took a long time to answer. "I'll tell you tomorrow!" he blurted, running over to Belch. The twins then tried pulling their dragon in opposite directions, but of course they didn't have any luck.

I sighed and rushed over to them. "Come on, you two," I told them. "Leave the dragon out of this, it's over!"

The twins let go of their dragon and glared at me. "You're right, it's over," seethed Ruff, walking out of the arena. "Yeah, it's so over, it's under!" Tuff claimed, leaving as well.

I couldn't help but feel sorry for the Zippleback as they tried to

follow their respective riders, but ended up collapsing. Barf and Belch didn't often bicker, but they looked like they were about to blow their fuses.

"What was that all about?" Astrid asked worriedly. "They'll be back," I assured her. But personally, I wasn't so certain at all.

-.--.-.-.

****Hiccup's House (Batwings' POV)****

I assumed my usual perch up in the rafters as Gobber tried to fasten a fancy belt around Stoick's waist. "Suck it in, Stoick!" he grunted, and Stoick took a deep breath. "It's sucked, Gobber!" he wheezed. "It doesn't suck any more than this!"

Hiccup walked in just then with Toothless on his proverbial tail. "Oh, the Ceremonial Belt," he said in realization. "That time again?" Stoick gasped, then managed to get enough air to reply, "Yep, tomorrow's the annual treaty-signing with the Berserker tribe."

I, who was busy trying to carve a Monstrous Nightmare out of a block of wood with my talons, abruptly looked up, suddenly very interested in their conversation.

"They've really gotta change tha' name," Gobber was saying. "When yer chief's called 'Oswald the Agreeable' and ya haven't been ta war in fifty years?" I dropped the wooden Nightmare, listening in to more of the conversation â€" this sounded a lot like the Berserker tribe that I encountered onceâ€|

"Oh, please tell me Oswald's not bringing that lunatic kid of his," Hiccup sighed. "Dagur?" Gobber asked rhetorically. "He'll be here."

Dagur, I thought, the name echoing in my mind as a scowl formed on my face, rapidly deepening as my fangs unconsciously flicked out.

Hiccup was talking again. "And let me guess â€" I'm supposed to keep him from breaking things again." Stoick raised a hand and corrected, "Actually, I have a more important job for you. I need you to hide all the dragons."

The scrawny boy's face was a peculiar mixture of relief and shock. "From Oswald the Agreeable?" he asked, incredulous. Stoick replied, "Just because we haven't had war for fifty years doesn't mean they still can't goâ€| well, berserk. The dragons could be seen as a sign of aggression. Better blissful than bloody, I always say."

The chief chuckled as Gobber piled on, "The last thing we want is another Berserker skirmish. They tend ta play fer keeps."

Hiccup nodded and then turned to me and Toothless. "Batwings, could you and Toothless go 'round the island and spread the word to the other dragons that they can't be on Berk for a few days?" Toothless instantly nodded and warbled up to me, "Come on, Batwings. We don't want any trouble amongst the humans."

Distractedly, I nodded. I stared off into the distance as my hand reached up to touch the old scar that wrapped around my neck.

"Batwings," Toothless said again, and I snapped out of my trance, fangs flicking back again. "Right. Hide the dragons. On it. Let's go."

-.--.-.-.

****Berk Woods (Hiccup's POV)****

I took a quick look below me and saw three Terrible Terrors wander off from the rest of the flock. "Toothless, plasma blast," I told him, pointing at the Terrors. The Night Fury hurled a bolt of flame that struck the ground behind them. Startled, the Terrors gave squeaks of fright and flew off again to join the other dragons.

"Come on, get back in line!" Snotlout called to them, coaxing them back with the massive group. Every dragon on the island was being moved to a neighboring island that would keep them safe for the next few days. As I had asked, Toothless and Batwings had informed the dragons of the temporary move, and there hadn't been any trouble.

"So," Batwings said casually, as he and Nightshade flew side by side. "Hiccup, I hear that the Berserker tribe's coming here tomorrow." I nodded at the Siren, who turned to Nightshade and had a rapid, quiet conversation with her.

Before I could ask what they were talking about, Snotlout cruised up on Hookfang and got my attention. "Is Dagur coming too?" he asked me hopefully. "That kid's so cool." I snorted and responded with a skeptical, "Cool? Please, last time he was here he used me as a knife throwing target!"

Astrid flew up between us and spoke in a voice riddled with disgust. "Of course he thinks Dagur's cool!" she scoffed. "He's like two Snotlouts in one! Every time he comes here he flirts with me until he leaves!" I rolled my eyes nonchalantly and told her not to worry about it. "This year's different though, remember?" I said, giving her a rare wink, which she returned with a smile.

"That kid should be locked up in a cage!" Fishlegs said. "That's what he did to me! And he wouldn't let me eat for three whole days!" Snaketail sighed "€" she'd apparently heard the whole story, since she had arrived on Berk about a month after the last Berserker-Berk meeting.

Snotlout laughed. "And then he force-fed you rotten cod heads!" he jeered. "Thanks," muttered Fishlegs. "I had almost erased that from my memory."

There was a sudden roar from down below. "Look out!" screamed Arachne. "Wild Zippleback!" We ducked as the dragon came soaring through our formation, its two heads fighting amongst themselves. "Where's Ruffnut and Tuffnut?" I asked, and everyone replied with shrugs. "Oh well, could someone go get that dragon?"

Sighing, Snotlout said reluctantly, "I'm on it!" and flew after it. When he reached the Zippleback, he positioned himself over it and dropped down onto the left head. Hookfang easily followed, keeping an eye on him.

"Astrid, Batwings, you two keep the other dragons on course!" I called to them, and they nodded and continued their duties. I steered Toothless toward Hookfang and the Zippleback, calling out to Fishlegs, "He needs another rider! Help him out!"

He called back with a hint of caution in his voice. "I'm not sure this is the best idea!" he said, before jumping from Meatlug's back to the Zippleback's right neck. Its head immediately began spewing gas that drifted back into Fishlegs' face.

"Ugh, I don't feel too good," he moaned. "It's the gas," I replied, "try not to breathe any in." My friend muttered bitterly, "That ship's already sailed."

Snotlout suddenly got a face-ful of gas and almost slipped off of the other neck. "How do you control this thing?" he shouted, trying to get back on. I squinted through the haze of gas, trying to see the two of them as Snaketail replied, "Whatever you do, Snotlout, don't spar"- Snotlout accidentally tugged on the left head's horns, and it reflexively spat out a spark that ignited the other head's gas.

There was a huge explosion that flung Fishlegs and Snotlout right off of the Zippleback's necks. They started to fall, only to have Hookfang swoop under them and neatly catch them on his back. "Now I feel worse," moaned Fishlegs. "Then if I were you," Snotlout advised him, "I wouldn't think about those cod heads sliding down your throat."

I looked away as Fishlegs leaned over and vomited. "Oh, that is disgusting!" Snotlout reprimanded him. I watched the Zippleback fly away to who knows where. _I could have sworn that was Barf and Belch,_ I thought to myself, but pushed the troubling thought away. I motioned to the others, then steered Toothless into a U-turn, back to help Astrid and Batwings herd the dragons away from Berk.

I was about to say something about the stray Zippleback, but Rilebolt suddenly moved without the prompting of Arachne and tail-slapped Toothless in the face. I was thrown off by the unexpectedly random physical insult, and most of the rest of the journey was spent trying to control an outraged Night Fury as he chased the laughing Skrill across the sky, much to the amusement of Snotlout, Astrid, and Fishlegs.

-.-.-.-.-

****Nameless Island (Toothless' POV)****

As Hiccup and the other humans surveyed the island, counting all the dragons and making sure that they were settled in, I conversed with Stormfly and the rest as we waited for our riders to mount us again.

"What happened to Barf and Belch?" I wondered, honestly worried for their safety. "Who knows?" Hookfang yawned. "It's their fault that

they decided to run amok just before the Berserkers arrived."

I glared at the Nightmare as the other dragons speculated further. "Maybe they're worried about their riders and are looking for them," hazarded Meatlug. "Where _are_ their riders?" replied Horrorcow with a question. "I haven't seen them all day!"

I shrugged as Nightshade spoke up, "It's not like them to be gone this long. I mean, they fight all the time, and they always make up sooner than later." I questioned her curiously, "You really think it has something to do with their fight yesterday?" She nodded honestly and said no more.

"Well, I hope they show up soon," Stormfly said, brushing dirt off of her scales. "Barf and Belch might get worried once they're done running around like chickens with their heads cut off."

Batwings was off by himself a short distance away, staring at nothing. "What about you, Siren?" Hookfang asked, and when he turned around with a clear question in his eyes, Stormfly rolled her eyes and repeated, "What do you think happened to the twins and their dragon?"

The Siren thought for a second before answering, "I'm not sure. But we're going to have to find them and get Barf and Belch under control before the Berserkers" â€

Suddenly, the sound of a horn rang out from the distance. "â€|are here," finished Stormfly grumpily. "Great," I muttered. "Just _great_."

-.--.-.-.

****Docks (Hiccup's POV)****

There was no time to search for the twins' dragon â€" or indeed the twins themselves â€" as the ship carrying the Berserker chief and his guards pulled into the port. I was with my dad and Gobber, waiting to welcome Oswald.

Normally, I'd be happy to see him â€" he was good-natured and, as his name suggested, agreeable. But if his demented son was coming, and a wild Zippleback was running amokâ€| then I'd just be happy to see the Berserker's backs as they left Berk for another year.

As I nervously eyed the dozen-odd additional Berserker ships anchored a few hundred yards from the docks, I nudged Stoick and tried to tell him about the rogue dragon. "Uh, Dad, there's a slight" â€" "Not now, son," he replied without looking down at me, "Oswald's here."

At last, the ship pulled up to the dock we stood on and dropped its anchor. A gangplank was raised and then lowered down to the dock, and the Berserkers' herald â€" the same one that had accompanied Oswald on his last visit â€" walked down the plank and onto the wood beside us.

The herald coughed once, and then pronounced in a loud, clear voice, "Presenting the almighty high chief of the Berserkers! Cracker of skulls, slayer of beasts, the great, fearsome" â€" "Oswald the Agreeable?" Gobber hazarded a guess. The herald glared, then finished

â€" "Dagur the Deranged!"

A sinking feeling took hold of me as the tall, lanky teenager hopped off the boat and made his way down to our level. "Dagur?" Stoick repeated, shocked. "Deranged?" Gobber asked with similar surprise. "Oh no," I muttered, just as Dagur caught sight of me and whipped a throwing knife in my direction.

I ducked just in time. The knife embedded itself in the wooden post behind me, right where my forehead had been half a second ago. Dagur's only response to my improved reflexes â€" thanks to months of riding Toothless â€" was a raise of his eyebrow and a disappointed frown.

"Dagur," my dad said firmly but not disrespectfully, "where's your father?" Dagur just stared at him down his nose and replied, "My father's beenâ€| 'retired'. He lost his taste for blood â€" I, on the other hand, am starving." He chuckled evilly, and my heart sank further. _This is not goodâ€|_ I thought.

"So," Dagur said, clapping his hands together and thankfully changing the subject. "Where are you hiding them, Stoick?" He looked honestly confused as he replied, "What is there to hide, Dagur?"

The new Berserker chief smugly put his hands on his hips and responded, "We both know what's going on. I hear on excellent authority that you are massing an army of dragons, of all things."

If my heart could have sunk any further, it would have. This was becoming a habit, I noticed.

Stoick chuckled. "Excellent authority," he laughed. "And who might that be?" Dagur suddenly looked nervous and drew a leg behind his other. "Never mind," he said, swiftly avoiding that particular topic. "All I have to say is that if I find it to be true, then my armada will rise up and crush you with the might of a thousand brave Berserker soldiers!" His expression changed to one of nervousness to one of barely contained, sadistic excitement.

"Stand down, Dagur," my father said. "There won't be any need for the armada." Gobber laughed and piled on, "Yeh'll find yer visit to be completely dragon-free â€" unless they attack, of course. Now, let's get ta the treaty."

Dagur smirked and pocketed another of his knives, which he had been twirling between his fingers. "Yes, let's," he agreed. "According to the treaty, my visit starts with a tour of Berk, the armory, the feast in the Great Hall, the killing arena â€" you do still kill dragons, right?" he added innocently.

"Your father never found the tour necessary," Stoick growled. Dagur didn't flinch, instead meeting his glare with one just as intense, but with a definite spark of madness dancing in it. "If you hadn't noticed, I'm not my father," he replied evenly.

That was when I made my escape, running off faster than a Grapple Grounder chased by an eel. "Oh, this is bad, this is bad, this is really badâ€|" I kept muttering to myself as I ran through the village.

In my haste, I smashed into Astrid coming the other way. I toppled to the ground on top of her with a grunt of pain. It was only when we had both shaken our heads and cleared them that we realized that our faces were almost touching. She smirked at me and cooed playfully, "Hey Hiccup." I immediately sat up, blushing faintly.

"Hiccup, we have a problem," Astrid said, sitting up and brushing herself off. "You're telling me!" I exclaimed, running my hands through my hair impulsively. "Dagur's the new Berserker chief!"

Whatever bad news Astrid had been expecting, it wasn't what I had just said. She paled and stepped back a pace, eyes bugging. "What?!" she demanded when she had gotten control of herself. "Yeah, his father 'retired'!" I informed her, quoting Dagur. "And that's not the worst bit â€" he thinks we're amassing an army of dragons!"

She shook her head and scoffed. "That brings us to our next problem," she told me, pointing down. I followed her finger and found myself standing in a Zippleback footprint. "Barf? Belch? Here?" I stuttered.

The answer I got was a distant gurgle. I reflexively turned around and saw none other than the Zippleback twins themselves snacking on a leftover basket of fish â€" right in plain sight of my dad and the Berserkers, coming straight this way!

Hastily, Astrid and I grabbed the basket and lured Barf and Belch away, safely out of sight as Stoick and Gobber led Dagur and his men to the food stores. But only a few seconds later, they finished the fish and bolted.

Smacking myself in the forehead, I followed Astrid and frantically pursued.

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****Nameless Island (Batwings' POV)****

Although I had no way of knowing it, just as Dagur was speaking to Stoick and Gobber at the armory, his exact words flowed through my mind â€" the same words he had spoken to himself the last time we met. _My father is a coward. I intend to return the Berserkers to their former glory, something my father seems incapable of doing._

I gritted my teeth at the memory. I remembered the meeting well â€" the Berserkers had come to treat with the Peaceables. The dragons were everywhere, going wherever they pleased, while at the same time making a point not to mingle with the Vikings. I had been curious about the new arrivals, especially the old, friendly chief Oswald.

But curiosity had caused my fate â€" Dagur snuck off against his father's wishes, looking for something to kill, and had almost immediately come across me spying on his tribe. The battle had been brief, but costly â€" I ended up the winner, blasting the impertinent boy into two full days' slumber, but not before Dagur had struck a near-fatal blow, slicing his blade across my throat.

The chief of the Peaceables had wanted to help me, but I had limped off. Somehow, I survived, but it had been a very close call. Now, I wore that same scar like an ugly red necklace.

"Nightshade," I abruptly told her, hopping off the boulder I had been sitting on, "it's time for me to settle an old score with an old enemy." She nodded, understanding what I meant. The Whispering Death waved her tail, wishing me good fortune as I shapeshifted into my eel form and headed for Berk, thoughts of vengeance and the death of a certain Berserker boy pervading my mind.

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****Berk Village (Hiccup's POV)****

"Where did they go?" Astrid asked, meeting up with me in front of Gobber's smithy. We had briefly split up to search for the Zippleback, but no luck. They seemed to have vanished! "I have no idea," I replied. "Come on, we should warn my dad."

I took off at a sprint for the armory, a hesitant Astrid following hot on my heels.

As luck would have it, I found Barf and Belch hanging by their tails from the roof of the armory. "Guys! You two shouldn't be here!" I whispered forcefully. They gave me quizzical looks. _Why?_ they seemed to be asking. "Come on," Astrid muttered. "Alrightâ€¦ think like Ruffnut and Tuffnut."

I glanced at her with a combination of disgust and skepticism. "I can't believe you just said that," I told her. "Barf, Belch! Sky! Go!" The two heads simply looked at me in amusement as I waved my arms at them.

Then I saw the handle of the armory door rattle. I heard Dagur's voice muttering something on the other side, and just as I was about to give in to panic, Toothless miraculously appeared and pulled Barf and Belch out of sight.

The next thing I saw was Dagur's disappointed gaze meet my frightened one, and his expression changed to one of warmth. "Ah, Hiccup!" he greeted me, then glanced over at Astrid. "And Astrid," he added, voice suddenly a lot more formal and mature. She snorted and kept close to me.

"Dagur!" I said in mock joy. "I was just thinking about you!" He chuckled and said wistfully, "Oh, the fun times we had, huh?" He pushed past me and Astrid, and then suddenly stopped.

"Hang on," he said without turning to face us, "where is it?" I gulped, and Astrid replied innocently, "And what would that be?"

He ignored her for once, walking right up to me. "Your leg," he said, pointing to the metal prosthetic. "It's an occupational hazard," I said sarcastically, inwardly relieved. "Look around, it's pretty normal for a Viking to go through life and lose a" â€" Dagur held up a hand for me to be quiet.

"Don't explain," he said conversationally. "I heard all about it â€" you, the Red Death, how you killed it all on your own?" I laughed,

trying not to make it sound flustered. "What?! Look at me! How is that even possible?"

Dagur laughed as well. "I thought so too," he chuckled. "And then I heard about the 'trained dragons'," he added, more seriously. This time, my attempt not to sound flustered was less successful. "T-Trained dragons? Oh, c-come on! H-How would you _train_ a dragon?!"

The adolescent chief's gaze grew deadly as he thrust his face menacingly into mine. "I don't know," he replied. "How would you?"

The question seemed to be asked with all honesty, as if Dagur really was interested in training a dragon. Something didn't add up here. He was doing all these things as the new Berserker chief to try and prove the rumor he apparently heard â€" the tour of Berk, examining the armory, requesting to visit the arena â€" and yet he seemed genuinely curious about the possibility of trained dragons. _Something isn't right,_ I thought.

Thankfully, Stoick appeared just then with Gobber by his side. "Alright, who's hungry?" he asked, breaking the tension. "It's that way, Dagur," Astrid advised him sweetly, pointing in the direction of the Great Hall.

As Gobber led Dagur and his guards, Stoick stayed behind with Astrid and I. "What's going on?" he asked seriously. "Ah, Iâ€| we've got a bit of aâ€| dragon problem," I sheepishly muttered. I then turned to Astrid and told her, "We really need the twins."

I never thought I'd say those words â€" but in this dire situation, they were our only hope.

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****Cliffie! We're going to get to the second exciting half in the next chapter. Which is when I think the episode actually starts getting interesting.****

****Anyway, review and wait patiently for the next chapter!****

31. Dagur Suspects

****Remember how, in Chapter 10, Batwings mentions that the scar around his neck was inflicted by Dagur?****

****Yep. They're going to have quite a happy reunion.****

****Also, I found a way to have my Hiccnut fun anyways XD****

****Matt: Who said I wasn't introducing Heather?! I've got something absolutely amazing planned for that episode(s), and anyway, she's probably my favorite character in the series.****

****Ferdoos: I'm going to do a crossover â€" either with Monster Hunter or Guardians of Ga'Hoole. Sound good?****

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****Twins' House****

I dashed across the plaza, heading to where I knew the twin's house to be. Astrid was following me, and I had asked the others to meet me there. However, both Fishlegs and Snotlout had declined "one was following Dagur like a curious kitten and the other was avoiding him like the plague.

Thankfully, Arachne and Snaketail were already there in front of the house, waiting for us. "Are Barf and Belch gonna die if the twins can't help us?" Arachne asked desperately, and Astrid ruffled her hair in an encouraging gesture. However, she didn't say anything. I could tell that she was as worried as everyone else was.

Toothless nosed the door open, and we all filed inside. It was a surprisingly clean, one-roomed house, with a small ladder leading to the second level "much like my own house. Although clean, it was still a little cluttered.

Just then, there was a blur of motion, and Arachne screamed slightly as Tuffnut suddenly hung down from the ceiling. "Whoa, what're you guys doing here?" he asked bluntly. "Hey Tuffnut," I greeted him. "Can we talk?" Astrid asked.

"Sure, whatever," he grunted, and he swung once, twice, and then flipped from his perch and onto the ground. It was pretty impressive. "Whoa. I love that part," he said with a dazed grin.

"Tuff," I said sadly, "About Barf and Belch " we need you and Ruffnut to help us get your dragon under control" But I was unable to continue as Tuffnut abruptly talked over me. "Ahahahahahah!" he said, cutting me off. "No, no thank you! I'm officially out of the dragon business. And the sister business. And the dragon-sister business."

Astrid looked at him skeptically. "What's going on with you two?" she demanded, both annoyed and confused. "Simple," he replied, grabbing a spoon off of the kitchen table. "You know what this is?"

I hesitated, wondering if it was a trick question, before guessing, "A spoon?" Tuffnut replied, "No, it's _our_ spoon! Just like this is our bowl" "he held it up "our axe" "he gestured to it "and our well-groomed stuffed yak." He pointed to the lifeless barn animal standing in a corner.

"Everything is _ours_!" Tuff concluded. "I'm sick of 'ours'" Just once, I want something that's mine. Now if you'll excuse me" He went over to a stool and picked up the bag sitting next to it.

The look in Snaketail's eyes was plain and obvious. _Let me be yours,_ they were saying. I pretended not to notice and asked gently, "Where are you going?"

Tuff turned back to us, this time with a surprisingly emotional expression on his face. "I don't know " to my dark, soggy alone place. Not to cry." He squinted his eyes shut and ran out of the house and into the plaza, soon disappearing from view.

"Dark, soggy alone place?" Astrid said in disgust. "Yeah, I don't

really want to know," I replied with a shake of my head. Behind us, Toothless warbled in sympathy for the fleeing boy.

None of us noticed Snaketail sneak off after him.

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****Great Hall****

I sat down heavily next to my dad in the Great Hall. We were sitting around the central fire, the spot normally reserved for the higher-ranking Vikings and honored guests. _Honored,_ I snorted to myself. The sooner the Berserkers left, the better. "Did you get that Zippleback?" my dad whispered. "We're working on it," I responded quietly.

Dagur rose from his seat just then and raised his goblet. "To death in battle!" he proclaimed, and the guards sitting along with us raised their mugs as well. I silently scoffed and rolled my eyes. _Typical Dagur,_ I thought.

"To yer father!" Gobber replied, standing up and raising his own mug.

"To Oswald the Agreeable!" Spitelout enthused.

"To peace for another year!" Stoick said.

"Fine, fineâ€¦" Dagur muttered, sitting back down. "'To Oswald! To Oswald!'" he mocked bitterly, forcefully plunging his knife into his mutton sandwich.

"He certainly has a hold on tha' whole 'deranged' thing," Gobber muttered to us before rising once more and holding up a long sheet of parchment. "And on tha' cheery note â€" shall we sign the treaty and send ya on yer way?"

Dagur actually smiled. "Great idea," he said. "Let's sign that treaty. Bring us the dragons' blood!" he suddenly called. "Uh, did you say what I think you said?" I asked him skeptically.

Stoick laughed before ending it with a cough. "Don't be ridiculous," he chuckled. "Your father and I haven't signed the treaty in dragon's blood for years!" Dagur's mood soured almost immediately upon hearing this. "Why would that be a problem?" he spat. "Unless you don't kill dragons anymoreâ€¦!"

My father glared as if he had been personally offended. "Of course we still kill dragons," he replied, acting appalled. But it was clear he was searching for a way out of the hole he had dug himself.

Gobber helpfully chimed in just then. "The problem is, we've killed so many! Why, there ain't a dragon around fer two hundred miles!" His hearty laugh was cut off by a sudden *bang*. The Great Hall's doors swung open forcefully, and Barf and Belch scuttled in, sniffing around curiously.

Both heads eyed the bewildered crowd. "Except tha' one," Gobber muttered. The Zippleback screeched and hightailed it out of the Great

Hall.

Dagur laughed delightedly. "A Zippleback!" he giggled. "It's a sign, a sure sign! A head for each chief!" He gave in to a brief fit of mad laughter that I wasn't sure to be frightened or disgusted by.

"Tonight, we hunt dragons!" he yelled triumphantly, drawing his axe. I looked on meekly as my dad leaned over and whispered, "You need to find that Zippleback before he does."

I gulped, then nodded. Without a single backwards glance, I slipped away, booking it out of the Great Hall.

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****Berk Coast****

After stealing a boat and rowing it all the way to the nameless island, we retrieved our dragons and went flying back to Berk through the sky, which was beginning to become streaked with orange as the sun sunk lower in the sky. "Hiccup, you heard Tuffnut," Arachne yelled across to me. "He said he went to his 'dark, soggy alone place'! That could be anywhere!"

I was about to give a suggestion when Snotlout disagreed. He interjected, "Not really! That could only be one place!" He paused, observing with satisfaction the looks of expectation on our faces.

"Well?" he said impatiently. My temper started to boil as I shouted over the wind, "Why didn't you say something?!" He retorted irritably, "Why didn't you ask?!"

Astrid gave him her most menacing glare. "We've been looking for them for an hour! If you don't tell us where they are I will throw you off of that dragon!" The last words were said in an angry screech that made me shudder.

"No need to get violent," he cautioned her casually. "He's probably at the Lost Cavern. Him and his sister used to play hide-and-go-kill there when they were kids."

I jumped into action. "Fishlegs," I commanded, "you go with Snotlout to the south entrance of the cavern. Astrid, Arachne and I will take the north." With that, I steered Toothless off to the northern coast, and Stormfly followed.

"Let's go!" I heard Fishlegs shout to Snotlout, who replied, "Hey, it's one thing for Hiccup to boss me aroundâ€|"

I grinned with amusement as their voices slowly faded into the distance. Astrid actually chuckled from her position just behind me.

Neither of us saw an emerald-scaled, serpentine dragon winding its way through the trees below us, heading straight for the village.

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****Lost Cavern****

The two entrances to the Lost Cavern, despite beginning in opposite directions, were actually close together. Fishlegs and Snotlout caught up to us relatively quickly before landing and disappearing around a corner of the cavern's outside. Astrid, her sister, and I made our way to the northern entrance and had our respective dragons light the torches we had brought with us.

I went in first, motioning for Toothless to stay close to me. I knew from experience how easy it was to get lost in this cave, but if our two groups kept to the main paths, then we'd come across the huge central cavern. The central cavern, I remembered, had two sections to it, divided by a massive rocky wall that reached almost up to the cavern ceiling. There had always been a human-sized opening at the bottom of the wall, allowing a person to slip through to the other side.

As we walked, I could hear nothing but ours and the dragon's footsteps and the steady dripping of moisture off of the walls and low ceiling. At one point, the two main paths wound so close together, I could actually hear the other two talking on the other side. "Did I mention I'm afraid of the dark?" whimpered Fishlegs' voice, both muffled and echoing. "What do you want me to do, hold your hand?" came Snotlout's tinny reply, making me smile.

After another ten minutes of traversing the winding tunnel, I heard a strange sound up ahead. I held up my hand, motioning for Astrid and Arachne to stop. They halted in their tracks as they, too, heard the noise.

"Stay here and don't move," I murmured to them. "If whatever's making that sound is a dragon, Toothless and I will be able to handle it." Arachne nodded and Astrid looked as if she wanted to argue, but held her tongue.

I led Toothless down the rest of the tunnel, and it opened up into the huge, central cavern. I held up my torch, and the light of the small fire extended a fair ways into the cave. I squinted faintly, and noticed something out of place. Sitting against the wall was

"Ruffnut?" I asked uncertainly. The girl looked up in astonishment. She shielded her eyes from the glare of the torch I carried and stood up awkwardly. "Oh, hey Hiccup," she said. A purple Terrible Terror was sitting innocently next to her, presumably the source of the noise I had heard back in the tunnel.

"What are you doing here?" Ruff asked cautiously, lowering her hand a little. I took a breath and answered, "We need you and Tuff. The Berserkers are after your dragon and" "Nuh-uh, no way," she interrupted me. "I'm officially out of the dragon business. And the brother business."

I rolled my eyes in exasperation, allowing the slightest of smiles to appear on my face. _She_ _and_ Tuffnut are more alike than either of them care to admit, _I reflected briefly. "Come on, Ruff, can you put aside your sibling rivalry?" Before I could continue, she interrupted again. "No way!" she protested angrily. "Back at our house, we have

to share _everything_! Everything is ours. I'm sick of 'ours'â€| Just once, I want something that's just _mine_."

I walked up to her in order to better make my point. "Ruff," I began, but she cut me off again. "Don't bother," she said with a mixture of frustration and sadness. "I decided to be happy with what I have. I already have what I want."

And before I could even open my mouth, she had lunged forward and wrapped her arms around me. Her face drew tantalizingly close as she held her mouth up to my ear and finished in a whisper, "... You."

I couldn't even get a word of protest in, because just like that, she crashed her lips into mine.

I felt a shock greater than anything Rilebolt could inflict surge through my body. My mind blanked out as Ruff continued to kiss me, pulling me ever closer. It was then that I deduced that she had caused me to lose my mind â€" after all, if I was perfectly sane, then I definitely _wouldn't_ _have_ reached up to clutch the back of her head, rotating my own to deepen the kissâ€| and I certainly wouldn't have closed my eyes and done nothing as I felt her tongue reach in to make contact with mineâ€|

That was when she was ripped away from me and reality returned to my mind. I blinked several times to clear my thoughts as I witnessed an enraged Astrid throw Ruff to the floor and kick her down several times with frightening severity. "That's for kissing my boyfriend," she said through gritted teeth.

I found my voice just then. "Astrid, I swear" â€" but my apology was replaced with a loud exclamation of pain as she punched me harder than she ever had in the arm. "And that's for enjoying it," she told me, the baleful look in her eyes daring me to disagree. I bit my lip and said nothing.

Suddenly, there was an unexpected voice that broke through the tension. "Umâ€| Tuffnut?" it asked loudly and uncertainly. It was coming from the other side of the wall. Then came another voice, which I definitely knew was Tuffnut's; "I ah, uh, thisâ€| this definitely is not what it looks like. Or is it?"

Bracing myself for the worst, I motioned the girls behind me to follow. I ducked through the small slot in the wall and blinked again, this time in pure astonishment â€" there was an annoyed-and-confused Tuffnut confronting a shocked and speechless Fishlegs and Snotlout. And beside Tuffnut was Snaketail, blushing ferociously until she was redder than her dragon.

"Toothless, plasma blast!" I told him, using the hand signal. He obediently shot a stalactite hanging above us, allowing it to glow with heat and bring more light to the cave. Astrid, Arachne, and Ruffnut crawled through the gap after me. "What are you doing in _my_ soggy place?" Tuff demanded upon seeing his sister. "This is _my_ soggy place!" she hissed at him. "And I'm not sharing it with _you_!"

I threw down my torch and raised my hands for calm. "Guys, please, listen! We need to get you to your dragon! Barf and Belch are in real trouble!" Tuff considered, then crossed his arms. "I'll go," he told

us, "but not with her." Ruff scowled and agreed, "I'm not going anywhere with her either!"

She smirked as he stammered, "Wait, what?!"

I butted in before they could start arguing. "You don't understand," I said, "you both have to go!" They looked at each other in bewilderment, and then stubbornly turned away. I sighed, and started the speech I never knew I was holding:

"Ruffnut, Tuffnut, like it or not, you're connected to each other. And the two of you are connected to that dragon, just like with me and Toothless. We can get you another spoon, another bowl, another stuffed yak â€" what we can't get you is another Barf and Belch!"

They glanced once more at each other, this time with sadness. "You think they got any of that?" asked Snotlout.

Then the twins stunned all of us as they simultaneously spat in their hands and shook them. "Fine," Ruff reluctantly said. "You know, I spit a little more in my hand," Tuff smirked proudly.

"They got it," Astrid said with satisfaction. "OK, let's go, we're out of time," I said frantically, cutting right to the point. "Why is this so important anyway?" Tuffnut asked in befuddlement.

Snotlout idly commented, "The Berserkers are hunting down your dragon in order to use its blood for ink."

There was a shocked silence.

"What?" asked Arachne, honestly confused. "Is that not what's happening?"

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****Berk Woods (Barf's POV)****

People often wondered if it was tough being a Zippleback. They just couldn't comprehend what it would be like having two heads, two separate consciousnesses sharing the same body.

Life in general is tough, was our usual reply. But we Zipplebacks had it tougher.

Hideous Zipplebacks were born originally as twins, two separate dragons within the same egg. Just before hatching, they fused together to spend life as one. In my opinion, it was to give us a stronger bond between our siblings and to make us more willing to work together.

The bond between Belch and I was as strong as iron. I would do anything for my dear brother. Despite our intense rivalry we shared, the love we shared was twice as intense. When the going got rough, and although we didn't have a choice, we stuck together.

Just as others couldn't imagine what it would be like having two heads sharing one body, I couldn't imagine what it would be like having a body to myself. I simply could not fathom being separated

from Belch. We had been literally stuck together from birth, and I never wanted that to change.

But on the run, frightened, and chased by hostile Vikings, I realized that if we didn't pull together fast, Belch and I would end up killed. If he died, I would die. Even if I was able to find the mental control to walk and fly without him helping, I would lose the will to live, and die of pure grief.

And it between life and death, it looks like death is the more likely outcome, I thought to myself, as the Vikings burst through the trees, ready to kill.

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(Hiccup's POV)

"There they are!" I shouted as Tuffnut and I sat aboard Toothless. Indeed, I had just spotted the lime-green Zippleback amongst the trees, wandering aimlessly through the forest. "We have to get you guys down there!"

But I was cut off by the sight of the Berserkers suddenly appearing, looping rope around the dragons' heads and tying them until they couldn't move at all. "No!" cried Tuffnut, and I urged Toothless down.

"What are you doing?" he demanded in a loud whisper, as our dragons settled down to perch unseen in the trees. "We can't afford to be spotted by the Berserkers," I replied, and that silenced him.

Stoick, Gobber, and Dagur suddenly emerged from the woods, approaching the downed Zippleback. Dagur shouted with wild excitement, instantly drawing his axe and sprinting maniacally for them. I closed my eyes as he raised the weapon above Barf's head and heard the clang of metal on metal.

I looked up once more to see my father's sword clashing against Dagur's axe. "How dare you?!" the boy demanded, outraged. "How dare you?!" Stoick replied evenly. "We're supposed to slay this dragon together, and that's what we'll do" in the arena, where dragon-killing is done.

Dagur looked at him with disgust, but that didn't last long. "To the arena!" he proclaimed, and stalked off, followed by his soldiers dragging the helpless Barf and Belch behind them.

I saw my dad and Gobber both look to where we perched, concealed in the trees, and then follow the Berserkers back into the woods.

When the clearing was empty, we urged our dragons down, climbing off of their backs and onto the ground. "The chief isn't going to let them kill our dragon, is he?!" Ruffnut pleaded desperately. "He won't have a choice," I replied sadly, "unless we can figure out a plan."

Snotlout puffed up his chest superiorly. "I have a plan," he boasted. "'Annihilate!'" He pointed in a random direction, and Hookfang responded by blasting his helmet off of his head.

"Or not," Snaketail said dryly. "Actually, that could work!" I exclaimed. I hurriedly told my new plan to my friends, and they wholeheartedly agreed. As we mounted our dragons in preparation for the flight to the arena, Ruffnut approached me. Quickly glancing over to make sure Astrid's back was turned, she whispered suggestively, "I'm not done with you yet," and then moved off to join Snaketail and Horrorcow.

I shuddered involuntarily. _Gods help me._

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****Arena (Batwings' POV)****

Off to the side of the arena I lurked, waiting for the prime opportunity to attack. I planned on striking when Dagur's back was turned, and of course before Barf and Belch were harmed. _He will never know what hit him,_ I decided, running my tongue over my fangs in anticipation.

"According to the treaty," announced Gobber, "the killing of the dragon must be" â€" "Bored!" Dagur interrupted, pushing him out of the way. "I want the head on the right!" he added, drawing his axe and advancing on Belch. The dragon gurgled pitifully, but Dagur ignored his protests. Barf moved her head over as if to protect him, but was pulled back by one of the soldiers. Again, Dagur took no notice. I readied myself for the attack.

Stoick muttered something under his breath, but I wasn't close enough to hear. However, I had an idea about what he said based on the way he drew his sword and advanced behind Dagur. The Berserkers made no move to stop him, thinking he was about to slay Barf instead.

No! my mind screamed in protest. _That boy is MINE!_ My muscles tensed up, and then released. With a shriek, I flew down through the metallic net and into the arena, talons thrown out. I landed on Dagur's armored chest, throwing him to the ground with a very un-chief-ly shriek.

Spreading my wings and blocking out the light of the setting sun from his eyes, I grinned and showed my fangs. "Hello again, Dagur," I whispered, reaching down to grab his face with my claw. Forcing him to look straight at me, I continued, "How have you been? Stay right there and don't move, okay? â€| I'm going to kill you."

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****(Hiccup's POV)****

Everyone was in their positions, and Dagur was about to be killed by a vengeful Batwings. I made the decision to move. "DRAGON ATTACK!" I screamed, running into the arena and feigning panic. "The dragons are attacking!" I screamed again, as everyone sprang into action.

Hookfang crawled down the long chain leading down to the arena and stopped to growl menacingly at the Berserker soldiers. From his vantage point at the edge of the arena, Snotlout threw his arm down

and pointed at a Berserker " the signal to _annihilate_. Hookfang snarled before spraying the Berserker with a jet of sticky flame.

"What is goin' on?" Gobber demanded. Stoick, at least, was quick to figure out our plan. "Gobber!" he exclaimed in exasperation, "_dragon attack!_" Gobber's eyes lit up with dawning realization. "Everybody outta here!" he yelled convincingly.

On Astrid's signal, Stormfly, Meatlug, and Horrorcow burst into the arena. Toothless stayed back and out of sight as Rilebolt let a screeching wail loose as she plunged down through the gaps in the arena's net. Hookfang aimed another jet of flame at another soldier as Stoick pushed Batwings away from Dagur, and Nightshade appeared from nowhere to help us.

I observed as everything unfolded below me. From the edge of the arena, I watched Astrid, Arachne, Fishlegs, and Snaketail take their positions behind several of the wooden boards set up around the circumference of the arena. Astrid gestured for Stormfly to use her spines, throwing her arms out in front of her. The Nadder launched several spines at one Berserker, who blocked most of them with his shield but ended up getting skewered by the last.

Another soldier advanced on Meatlug cautiously, and Fishlegs signaled for her to _hug_. The Gronckle eagerly pounced on the Berserker, tongue lolling out as she tackled him to the ground. Yet another Berserker attacked Horrorcow, and it was only when Snaketail snapped her fingers that she defended herself, cracking her tail with a noise that easily broke the sound barrier. The Berserker fled at the noise.

"We must protect our honored guest!" said Gobber, holding Dagur away from the fight. "Run if you want!" he objected, breaking free and drawing his axe. "Dagur the Deranged does not flee!" He turned towards the still-helpless Barf and Belch, eager to kill something in his bloodlust.

That was when Rilebolt plunged down and challenged him with a wail. "A Skrill!" he gasped. "They do exist!" He threw his axe over his shoulder and let out a battle cry. Arachne saw the trouble her dragon was in and spread her arms wide. Rilebolt screeched, and a powerful current emanated from her scales with a loud buzzing noise. Her electrified tail lashed the Berserker holding down Barf and Belch, and the armor he wore magnified the electricity, instantly frying him.

Dagur stumbled backwards as he felt the powerful electricity even from the distance he was at. Batwings recovered his balance from when Stoick shoved him away and lunged, still thirsting for his revenge. Gobber "protected" Dagur by taking the Siren by the arm and yanking him away. "Yer dragon needs help!" he whispered forcefully, prompting Batwings to look toward Nightshade.

I looked as well and saw the Whispering Death backed up against a corner by a soldier. Batwings nodded to Gobber " even his desire for revenge on Dagur paled in comparison to his love of Nightshade. He flew up behind the soldier so that she could clearly see him, and he made the sign for _burrow_ " that is, an open palm that suddenly clenched into a fist.

Nightshade lunged with a hiss, and I covered my eyes as the sound of rotating teeth shredding through metal and flesh screeched through the already considerable din.

Barf and Belch, now free of the warriors that had held them down, stood up fully and glared daggers at Dagur, so to speak. From my position, I nodded to Ruff and Tuff, and they ran to stand above the exit. The Zippleback spotted them even as Dagur readied his axe.

"Barf, gas!" Ruff whispered, moving her hand away from her mouth as if blowing a kiss. Barf's keen ears heard her and she obediently sprayed Dagur with her nauseating green gas. "Belch, spark!" Tuff murmured as he stuck out his thumb and forefinger. Belch seemed to smirk as he lit Barf's gas with a satisfying *kzatch!*

Dagur yelled in pain as the explosion flung him into the far wall. Burnt and bruised, he picked himself up, only to be flung aside by Stormfly's tail. Ruff and Tuff signaled again to Barf and Belch as two more Berserkers moved to attack them — Barf headbutted one away, and Belch picked one up by the head and spat him out at the wall. I grinned as I remembered the twins using those exact signals to hurt each other a few days ago.

Dagur painfully got up off the ground, and Batwings saw his chance. Shapeshifting, he threw his heavy eel-like body in Dagur's path, hissing in fury. The Berserker chief grabbed a spear and hurled it at Batwings with all his might.

Seeing that the moment was at hand, I signaled Toothless even as I ran for the entrance. I made it in time to see the Night Fury jump from nowhere, catching the spear and snapping it between his teeth. "What the Hel is that?!" Dagur cried, obviously unfamiliar with the practically-unknown dragon.

I grabbed a dagger and a shield, throwing myself in between the two dragons and the boy. "Back you! fiends, you!" I proclaimed to Batwings and Toothless. Batwings hissed, clearly not amused. "You'll not harm my friend Dagur!" On that last word, I smashed my shield into him as if protecting him, forcing him to look away.

In the few seconds that followed, I whispered from the side of my mouth, "Batwings, don't harm him! If he dies, then there's war, got it?" The Siren audibly growled, but nodded and agreed to play along. Satisfied, I gave Toothless the plasma blast signal.

Dagur shoved my shield away just in time to see Toothless' mouth open and a blue light build in his throat, his signature screech building right along with it. I shoved Dagur away and I dove to the ground as Toothless' shriek reached its peak and he shot a plasma blast at the wall, decimating part of it.

We ran for the entrance as Hookfang, Meatlug, and Nightshade shot fire bursts all over the arena, causing many of the Berserkers to flee. "Go, Dagur, save yourself!" I called to him, blocking Toothless from "harming" him. Toothless played his part well, lunging at me and pinning me to the ground. He roared in mock frustration as I held his foot up with my shield. "Go!" I called again, strain entering my voice. "You owe it to your people!"

More fire bursts blasted the area around Dagur, finally convincing him to change his mind. "Berserkers, to the boats!" he yelled, but Gobber chased him. "Wha' about the treaty?!" he asked desperately.

Dagur considered, then as Batwings' invincible flames shot past him "€" much too close to have been an intentional miss "€" and then yelled back, "Consider it signed!" He then ran off.

Stoick, with effort, held Batwings back from chasing Dagur down. The Siren changed shape once more, taking the form of a very annoyed humanoid. "Good work, son!" he said to me as Toothless helped me up, threatening demeanor completely gone now. "I hope we don't see much more of Dagur the Deranged."

I grinned exhaustedly. "I hope so too," I agreed.

Torches were lit all around as the sun set and me and my friends stayed behind to clean up. Everyone except Batwings was elated and exhausted. The aforementioned character was seething at Dagur's narrow escape. "You can't run," I heard him hiss under his breath. "I'll get you eventually, if it's the last thing I do!"

I watched everyone getting along with and congratulating their dragons for a job well done, when Snotlout's voice caught my attention. "I still think Dagur's cool!" he said haughtily to the twins.

Ruff and Tuff simply grinned as they simultaneously signaled to Barf and Belch. The Zippleback subsequently smoked Snotlout, and the four heads bumped into each other happily.

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****Sea Around Berk (Dagur's POV)****

I was certainly scared, but mad as well. Also, I had to admit that I was impressed with Hiccup the Useless, coming to my defense against that mysterious dragon. And that blasted Siren! Who knew that the devil I injured all those years ago would come back to haunt me?

I booted the pilot away from his station as I took charge of the ship. "Those Outcasts lied," I muttered angrily. "We had a deal "€" they make me chief and I get those dragons! Alvin and I are going to have a _long_ talk when we meet again!"

-.-.-.-.-

I used to think four heads was a little crazy, and I wasn't wrong.

But I'll take crazy over Berserk any day of the week.

-.-.-.-.-

****I just want to say that I love the scene where the Berserkers catch Barf and Belch running amok in the woods. Why, you ask? They remixed the Red Death's battle theme for that scene! Love that**

music.**

So, I thought Barf's and Dagur's POVs were genius on my part, clearing up a bit of unexplained information there. I just figured those would be welcome points of view to give their perspectives on the situations.

And I'll rest now for a while, Hiccstrid fans. I've had my Hiccup-Ruffnut fun for now XD

Review, and I really look forward to writing the next exciting chapter!

32. Heather Report

At last, it's time for my favorite episode (technically, episodes) of "Riders of Berk". I really like Heather, mostly because she pretends to be kind but ends up being quite sinister. Characters like that intrigue me.

Ferdoos: Why did he enjoy it? A) He's an adolescent boy, B) I think Ruffnut at least deserves a chance, and C) I'm pure evil like that :D

I never knew you liked Monster Hunter. I've got a few MH fanfics of my own if you haven't noticed. Funnily enough, Plesioth hasn't appeared in any of my fanfics yet despite being my favorite monsterâ€¦| Hmmâ€¦|

Matt: That's actually a good idea. If I can, I could definitely squeeze in some kind of supernatural OC. But no guarantees, I can't say for sure whether or not any character positions are free in this fanfic.

And don't worry about it. I'm glad you aren't gone for good, and I'm happy your little outburst wasn't my fault.

-.-.-.-.-

Arena (Hiccup's POV)

Toothless and I landed breathlessly on the floor of the arena. The two of us had just flown around the entire island once in a challenge I called a "time trial". Basically, we would each take our turns flying once around Berk as fast as we could, trying to beat not only the others', but our own as well, scores.

I was currently in the lead, with Arachne and Rilebolt close in second. This only seemed to push the Skrill's hatred of Toothless even farther. She spent most of her idle time hanging by her tail from the arena net and glaring at him.

The rest of the gang were at various points behind us. In order, Toothless was leading, with Rilebolt nipping at his tail (sometimes literally), and then Horrorcow, Stormfly, Hookfang, Barf and Belch, Nightshade, and finally Meatlug.

I hopped off of Toothless and turned to Fishlegs, who had been

keeping the time. "So, how'd I do?" I asked. "New course record!" he exclaimed. "Technically, you're still the fastest, but someone â€" and I won't mention who â€" is gaining significant ground."

I glanced at the twins, whose helmets' horns were stuck around each other. "Don't look at us!" Tuff snorted. Fishlegs returned to keeping the time as Snotlout took off for his turn. Arachne smirked at me, and Rilebolt copied her rider's smug look.

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered. "How is that possible? How can Toothless be getting slower?" Astrid looked my way and grinned, "He's not. Riley's getting faster."

I looked to Arachne for an explanation. I knew it was odd having a ten-year old hanging around with us teenagers, but she had proved herself a great rider â€" and of an unruly Skrill, no less â€" and was definitely a worthy addition to the Academy.

"Really, is that so?" I asked snidely. "Anything you'd like to share, Arachne?" The girl smirked again, not at all intimidated. "All I'm saying is that I've been experimenting with what Riley eats. Apparently, it's working â€" and making Toothless mad." Indeed, Toothless was meeting Rilebolt's grin with a snarl. Rilebolt just burped out a spurt of white fire and said nothing.

"The irony," Ruff sneered. "The little girl's beating all of us, and almost has you too." I just smiled good-naturedly back. "You want something ironic?" Batwings suddenly yawned, waking up from his nap and rubbing his eyes tiredly. "A Timberjack getting a splinter. It happened just a few days ago, he was in enough pain to do a Horrocow and take it out on the villageâ€"!" He yawned again and slumped back against Nightshade, who hissed and drew her tail around him.

"Are you OK, Batwings?" I asked. "You're always sleeping at this time of the day." He looked at me through heavy-lidded eyes, somehow managing a glare. "It's late afternoon," he murmured. "How you humans can still be up and about at this un-Thor-ly hour is completely beyond me." He settled back down and said no more.

There was a sudden roar echoing over the mountain, and a crimson streak came flashing through the blue sky which, indeed, was beginning to change color as the sun sank lower in the sky.

Snotlout and Hookfang landed with a satisfying thump. "What's the time, Fishy?" asked Snaketail, in good spirits from her satisfactory lap earlier. "Never mind that!" enthused Snotlout. We gaped at him â€" normally he'd be the first one to ask and the first to brag at anyone still trailing behind him. "You are not going to believe what I found!" he said, crossing his arms.

"A severed head?" guessed Tuffnut. "Our cousin Lars?" questioned Ruffnut. "_Our cousin Lars'_ severed head?!" Tuffnut asked again, excitedly. "Lars died?" Fishlegs asked, voice cracking.

"Excuse me!" Snotlout broke in loudly. "But do you want to see this or not?"

-.-.-.-.-

****Hidden Beach****

Snotlout and Hookfang led us to one of the most remote places on the island. It was a tiny speck of an island that was connected to the main island via a narrow land bridge that only appeared twice a day. There was nothing but rocks and sand here, as well as the occasional dead fish or sea shell washed up on the shore.

But today, there was an additional feature " in the fading light, we saw a small boat sitting on the shore, completely destroyed. The mast and sail was folded over the edge of the boat, creating a small, dark shelter. It was loosely wedged between two large rock formations.

"Huh, a wrecked boat on Berk?" Tuff snorted. "Yeah, there's something new." Snotlout ignored him, walking confidently up to the shipwreck. "Just remember, I found it, so it's mine," he told us with a grin, motioning for us to peek under the sail. We did so, and I let out a soft gasp.

Under the overturned boat, wrapped in shadow, lay a young girl, completely unconscious and splayed out on the sand. Her raven-black hair was all over the place, erratically spread out over the ground. I held a hand to my mouth, and beside me, Astrid looked just as worried as I was.

Arachne crawled between us and gasped loudly. "Will she be alright?" she asked her older sister. Astrid shook her head " she didn't know.

"Now I like the boat," Tuffnut muttered. "Hey, remember? She's mine!" Snotlout whispered. "She's a person, you dumb troll," snapped Ruffnut.

At the sound of Ruff's harsh voice, the mysterious girl twitched. I held my breath as she moved again. With a soft, barely audible groan, she sat up and instantly saw us. Suddenly, she looked wide awake as she gasped and shrank back deeper into the darkness.

"It's OK," I said quietly, trying not to startle her further. "We're friends." The girl seemed to become more curious than frightened, inching back into the light. I was momentarily stunned by her unexpectedly pale skin and oddly colored eyes. "Do you have any water?" she rasped, her voice almost unable to be heard.

Snotlout, Tuffnut, and even Fishlegs each offered her a cup. Arachne finally squeezed in between them and held out her own cup. "Here," she said, smiling sweetly. The girl eyed the cup as if it were a poisonous spider before suddenly snatching it.

Within the space of a few seconds, the water was gone. "Thank you," the girl said, giving Arachne her cup back. "Wh-where am I?" I pulled Arachne back and replied, "This is Berk! It's our home."

Toothless suddenly butted his head in with a loud warble. The girl actually screamed, albeit quietly, before diving back into the shadows again. "It's fine," I told her, nudging Toothless away. "He won't hurt you. Come on out."

Several long seconds crawled by before the girl gathered the courage

to creep out from her demolished boat. She stood up cautiously, warily staring at Toothless. "Easy, bud," I murmured to him, placing my hand on his snout. He backed away and sat on his rump, looking back at the girl with intense curiosity. "How did you do that?" the girl asked me, amazed.

"Pfft," Snotlout said dismissively with a wave of his hand. "That's nothing. Watch this." He turned to Hookfang, who was resting on the beach, and ordered, "Hookfang, get your lazy butt over here."

The Monstrous Nightmare slowly got up, stretched for the longest time, and smacked his jaws. He glanced at Snotlout, stuck out his forked tongue, and soared up into the sky, disappearing from view. "Ah, Hookfang, that jokester," Snotlout chuckled lamely. "He'll be back." Snaketail sneered at him, "Eventually."

"My name's Hiccup," I said to the girl, pushing Snotlout aside. "And I'm the one who rescued you," he countered, pushing back. She ignored him and smiled at me gratefully. "Heather," she said in her usual quiet tone. "I'm of the Peaceable tribe. From SirenIsland."

I raised my eyebrows, and behind us, Batwings got up, suddenly wide awake. "Who's from SirenIsland?" he demanded, bumping the twins aside to get to the front of the group. As soon as he laid eyes on Heather, though, he immediately clammed up and glared at her suspiciously.

"S-Sirenâ€|" she murmured, stepping backwards as if ready to dive back into her boat. He took a similar step backwards, hissing under his breath. "Batwings, give it a rest," I told him exasperatedly. "So what if you don't trust her at first sight? Just be nice, alright?"

The Siren shifted his glare toward me, prompting me to be quiet. He cautiously took a step toward Heather, sizing her up. I was about to tell him to back down when, astonishingly â€" "My name's Batwings."

I gaped, as did everyone else. Heather noticed this and inquired, "What's wrong?" I fumbled for words, momentarily speechless. Suddenly, Fishlegs blurted, "It's almost unheard of for a Siren to trust someone as quickly as that! Even with Hiccup, it took a few minutes, and with the rest of us, we had to fight for our lives alongside him before he would talk to us!"

Batwings was balefully staring at him. "So?" he asked. "A Siren's intuition is never wrong. And mine is telling me to trust her." Heather smiled at him, blushing with embarrassment. "I'm flattered," she murmured, casting her eyes downward humbly.

"So, Heather," Astrid interjected. "What happened to you? How'd you crash your ship on Berk?" Her smile dropped faster than a hailstone. She gulped and whispered, "My family and I were on our way back to our island. We arrived to find it under attack by pirates."

Tuff eagerly spoke up, "I wanna be a pirate!" Everyone turned to look at him. "O-Or a fish cleaner. Still on the fence," he amended.

I gestured for Heather to continue. "They noticed us arrive and captured us," she continued sadly. "I managed to escape when their

backs were turnedâ€¦ but my parents weren't so lucky." Her voice broke and I felt a stab of pity. "Stupid pirates!" Tuff raged. "I definitely want to be a fish cleaner!"

I put a reassuring hand on Heather's shoulder. "Hey, everything's going to be alright from now on," I murmured. She turned to look at me hopefully. "My dad's the chief," I told her. "We'll figure something out." I led her away with Snotlout looking on disbelievingly.

I caught Astrid's strange look. I didn't know whether it was suspicion, sadness, or something else, but I was bothered by it. As I helped Heather climb onto Toothless' saddle, she called, "Don't forget, we're meeting tomorrow to work on our times!" Her voice was cheery and carried no inflection of the look I had seen previously. _That's odd,_ I thought to myself. "Unless, of course, you want Stormfly to be the fastest dragon in the book."

I shook my head nonchalantly. "Yeah, that's definitely not going to happen," I replied. I patted Toothless' neck and caught Heather looking at me questioningly. "You'll see," I told her with a confident smile. "Now hold on."

She gasped and held onto my shoulders as Toothless and Stormfly took off. All of the other dragons followed, leaving Snotlout stranded on the beach. "Can I get a ride from someone?" he yelled, his voice coming back faintly in my ears.

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****Hiccup's House****

Night was falling by the time I had gotten back to my house. I had gone straight to my dad and explained Heather's situation to him, and he had graciously allowed her to stay for as long as she needed. Then he had gone off to bed, leaving me and Toothless to show her upstairs.

"Right this way, watch your step," I called back as I led her up to my room. I had already decided that it wouldn't be so bad for her to use my bed, and that sleeping on the floor downstairs wouldn't really be a problem.

"It was nice of your father to allow me to stay here," Heather said. Toothless curled up on his bed and Batwings perched in the rafters, and she watched them in amazement. It was clear that the idea of humans and dragons working and living together was still very new to her. "Well, until we can find you a safe place to go, consider Berk your home."

Heather walked over to my study desk and the drawings that littered it. "What are these?" she asked, interested. "A new saddle and tail fin for Toothless," I told her, picking up a piece of parchment. "We're trying to get extra speed so we can stay on top of Arachne and Rilebolt."

She just smiled knowingly and said nothing. A small silence descended and I coughed. "So, can I get you anything? Warm yak milk or a nice fish stew?" Heather shook her head and replied, "No thanks, Hiccup. I just want to get some rest. It's been a long day for meâ€¦"

I nodded and motioned Toothless down the stairs. "You too, Batwings," I said. Already comfortable on his perch, Batwings grumbled under his breath as he fluttered down to the stairs. "Night," he said simply, waving at Heather before disappearing.

I followed him down the stairs and gave Heather one last look. "Sleep well, OK?" I asked, and she smiled and nodded gratefully.

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****Astrid and Arachne's House (Astrid's POV)****

My little sister had already gone to bed, leaving the duty of feeding our dragons dinner to me. It was almost midnight as I lugged three baskets of raw chicken into the yard where Stormfly, Spike, and Rilebolt slept.

Arachne had discovered that chicken had the mysterious effect of increasing Rilebolt's strength and stamina, allowing her to fly even faster. So far, I hadn't seen any similar effects with Stormfly and Spike, but at least the Nadders seemed to like it.

"Eat up, you three," I told them cheerfully. "By the time the rest realize that this is what's giving you so much energy, Riley, Toothless is going to be eating your dust."

The Skrill screeched softly, eagerly flinging a leg into her mouth. It was then that I heard a strange noise coming from the other side of the plaza. "What is it?" I asked, as the three dragons suddenly perked up and surveyed the area suspiciously.

Rilebolt let out another shriek. It was then that I heard the noise again. It seemed that whatever was making that noise was using the dragons' own noises to cover itself up. "Stay here, you guys," I cautioned the dragons, before moving off to investigate.

I peeked behind a building, looking in the general direction of where the noise was coming from. Just then, I heard the same sound, this time from behind me. I whipped around in time to see a shadowy figure fleeing behind a building and out of sight.

I squinted. Something about the figure had seemed a little familiar. But that was ridiculous â€" none of my friends had pitch-black hair. _Wait._ It clicked in my mind, prompting me to speak the figure's name â€" "Heather?" I asked uncertainly.

Riley's screech came from the other end of the plaza, punctuating my thoughts and sending a tingle up my spine.

Something isn't right.

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****Gobber's Forge (Hiccup's POV)****

I was busy working on Toothless' new fin in the forge. Gobber had gladly allowed me to use the forge, understanding that Toothless would want to stay on top of "tha' hated Skrill" no matter

what.

Just as I put down the hammer, a voice startled me. "You're up early." It was Heather, melting out of the darkness of the forge's interior. If that bothered me, I kept it to myself. "Yeah, just wanted to get the jump on this," I replied modestly. "I always was a bit of an early bird."

Heather examined the saddle that already stood finished beside me. "You know, with a shorter connecting rod, it would push you back on the saddle and make you more streamlined," she advised. "Which would increase our speed!" I said incredulously. "You hear that, Toothless? Rilebolt is going to be chasing that tail of yours for a while longer."

The Night Fury gurgled along as the two of us laughed. "When can we test it out?" Heather asked eagerly. "There's no time like the present," I said with a smirk. "So how about right now?"

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****Arena (Astrid's POV)****

As everyone waited for Hiccup to arrive, I sat aboard Stormfly, ready to go. _Where the heck are they?_ I asked myself, growing visibly annoyed.

There was a rush of wind and a roar, accompanied by Hiccup's shout. Of course, it was Toothless. I gawked as they raced by, seemingly even faster than before. And to infinitely worsen my mood, I could hear Heather's laughter ringing out into the air as well. "You have got to be kidding me!" I muttered.

Everyone was restless, not seeming to notice that Hiccup had yet to arrive. "Are we training or not?" shouted Snotlout after Hookfang singed his jacket again. "Where's Hiccup?" Fishlegs asked, after he was finished cleaning out Meatlug's ears.

I growled, voice heavy with disgust, "Giving a private lesson." I pointed to the black dragon circling at ridiculous speeds in the pure blue sky. "Ooh, I didn't know he gave private lessons!" enthused Snaketail. "Can anyone get in on that?"

My voice carried the weight of even more disgust as I replied, "Nope. Just her."

Ruffnut sat up from her resting position on Barf's neck. "Uh oh," she sang delightedly. "I think there's another hen in the rooster house." She looked positively giddy as she observed my scowl. "Uh oh," repeated Tuffnut, bored. "There's another rooster in the hen house!" Wait, what?"

I glared even more fiercely at Ruffnut, but only managed to make her smirk mockingly. "Nothing," I said to Tuff. "She thinks I'm jealous. Which is completely ridiculous."

Tuff looked even more confused. "Jealous," he mused. "Of who? Me? Wait, am I the rooster or the hen?" I scratched Stormfly's jaw as I replied fiercely, "Trust me. The last thing I am is

jealous."

Batwings, who was lying on the ground beside Nightshade and the Zippleback twins, raised a claw and said idly, "Jealousy's a sin, you know, Astrid." I glared at him, but he didn't even look up â€" he just lay on his back and traced imaginary designs in the air in front of him. He sounded almostâ€¦ dejected.

Hiccup, Heather, and Toothless suddenly swooped in and landed. "Top of the morning, class!" he said cheerily, helping Heather down from Toothless' back. My scowl deepened as he continued, "How's everyone doing today?"

I snorted. "Nice of you to show up," I said sarcastically. He looked at me with bewilderment before facepalming. "Ohhhhh, we were supposed to meet up," he muttered. Stormfly yawned and preened her wings briefly beside me as I kept up the skeptical glare.

"Awwwwk-ward," Snotlout sang to the twins. Tuff's eyes lit up as he said, "Oh, I've got it! Astrid's jealous of the pretty one! Why all this talk about hens and roosters?"

Arachne skipped up to Heather and asked, "So, sleep well, Heather?" The new girl laughed and knelt down to my sister's level. "Very well, thank you, Arachne," she said, ruffling her hair. I narrowed my eyes.

"So this is it," Heather said, turning to Hiccup. "Your dragon training academy." He nodded. "No, _our_ dragon training academy," Fishlegs corrected. "Everything we learn goes right in here." He held up the Book of Dragons.

"Really?" Heather inquired, very interested. "Yep," he said in a sing-song voice. "I'm the log keeper â€" well, log master, really," he added, adjusting his helmet modestly. "He just writes what Hiccup tells him to," Snotlout jumped in.

"May I see it?" Heather asked excitedly. Suddenly, I realized that no good would come of letting Heather read the Book of Dragons. I snatched it from Fishlegs and said, "I'll take that, thank you." I stormed off, tugging Hiccup's arm and leading him to the other side of the arena.

"Hiccup," I whispered as soon as we were out of earshot. "I don't think we should be showing her all of our dragon secrets." He gave me a withering look and replied evenly, "Astrid, it'll be fine."

My glare heated up. "I don't trust her," I growled. "Batwings does," he said smugly, knowing that I couldn't argue with that. "And that's good enough for me."

He walked off, toward where Snotlout, Tuffnut, and again, even Fishlegs were casually chatting with Heather. Ruffnut was smirking at me from the sidelines, and Batwings hadn't moved.

As I watched, the Siren suddenly rolled over and shapeshifted, stretching and yawning widely. The sun fell over his scales, allowing them to gleam and glimmer like a fish's. Heather's attention was caught by the display, and she eyed him. Quickly, Batwings coiled up, avoiding her gaze.

But the second she looked away, I saw Batwings turn to look. There was a kind of bored curiosity in his eyes, and I thought that he, maybe, shared my opinion that she wasn't really all that impressive. But just as I thought that, I witnessed his look change to one of longing.

I growled and slapped my face in exasperation. _Even Batwings!_ I thought in frustration. _Even the damn Siren is smitten with her! That's just disgusting and unnatural!_

I shuddered, deciding to ignore the feeling of dread developing inside of me.

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****Berk Village (Heather's POV)****

"So, Mr. Fishlegs," I said to the boy politely as he scratched his dragon behind the ears. I had decided to use these last few hours of the day to try and get a bit of information out of Hiccup and his friends. It had been easy asking Hiccup about his Night Fury â€" one question and he spilled more beans than was necessary. I smiled inwardly at this memory, then quickly snapped back to reality.

"Tell me, Fishlegs," I continued casually, "what would one find in the Book of Dragons about, sayâ€"|" I pretended to think. "The magnificent Gronckle!" I pointed to Meatlug, making sure to twist my face into a look of curiosity and even a bit of endearment.

"Well," he began, "the Gronckle is a member of the Boulder class of dragons. It's fourteen feet long with a ten-foot wingspan. And exactly four hundred and twenty-four pounds of pure love." He hugged his dragon â€" Meatlug, was it? â€" around the head, making her gurgle with pleasure.

Not the information I needed. "She's so cute," I gushed over the dragon â€" a difficult task considering that I'd always found Gronckles unpleasant â€" and asked another question. "But how could such a harmless-looking thing perform in battle?"

Fishlegs smiled knowingly at me. "She's not harmless," he informed me proudly. "Her skin is thick and impenetrable like armor. It's also quite springy. Her tail is tough, bulbous, and deadly, and can be used like a bludgeon."

I let a genuine smile cross my face. This was exactly what I was looking for. "She sounds so fierce," I said, letting a note of restrained fear enter my voice. "Oh, she's fierce on the outside," Fishlegs assured me. "But inside, she's as soft as a bed of rose petals, aren't you, Meatlug?" He hugged her and kept up the baby talk.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes and left the two alone. I had gotten what I wanted from Fishlegs, so it was time to move to the tougher targets â€" _No pun intended_, I giggled to myself as I went down to the docks and found Tuffnut with his dragon.

He greeted me warmly and granted my request to help him train his dragon to spit fire. He sat on Belch's head while I straddled Barf's.

"So, Tuff, tell me how this works again?" I pushed him.

"OK," he said eagerly. "You yank on her horns and she spits up this really nasty gas, and I will spark it. But try not to breathe any in." My curiosity was piqued at this potentially useful bit of info. "Why not?" I asked. "You don't want to know," was all he would say.

"I'll give you the signal," he said. "Which I always forgetâ€¦" he added, banging his head with his fist. "How about 'fire'?" I suggested. He brightened and replied, "Yeah, that was it! You're good at this, much better than my sister."

I grimaced as he swung Belch's head up to Barf's, grinning at me. "Uh, yeah," I said nervously. "Why don't we concentrate at the task at hand?" I pointed to the intended target. "Alright, ready?" he asked, as we aimed the Zippleback's heads into position.

"Signal!" he shouted. "I mean, FIRE!" I yanked on Barf's horns at the same time Belch lit the resulting burst of gas. The fireball flew at the boat idling in the water â€" which was revealed to have Vikings already in it as they dove into the water to avoid the fireball.

"Oh my goodness!" I yelped, shocked at the damage we had caused. "What do we do now?" Tuffnut grinned mirthlessly as he responded, "Usually we hide until the chief finds us. Then we get in trouble. Heheheâ€¦" he laughed as he slid off Belch's head and ran for it.

I walked back up to the village, counting on my hands the list of facts I had learned in just less than an hour. _And the list is about to get longer,_ I said to myself as I saw Snotlout and Hookfang lounging in the village.

I cut right to the chase when I greeted them both. Patting Hookfang's nose, I said, "I have to admit, this Monstrous Nightmare is most impressive." Hookfang gurgled at the compliment and nudged my hand as a thank-you.

"Yeah, I guess," he replied, bored. "So let's talk about you and me. You never did thank me for saving your life." This time, the urge to roll my eyes was almost irresistible. But I managed to grit my teeth and say, "You're right. Thank you, Snotlout." _Goodness, those words were hard to choke out._

"So," I said, ready to turn the conversation around again. "How much does Hookfang weigh?" He replied in a bored voice, "Oh, about five thousand pounds, give or takeâ€¦" he's monstrous. Kind of like his riderâ€¦" he trailed off and looked at me expectantly.

Ugh, he's right about that, I thought. But just then, there was the sound of flapping wings as Batwings appeared from nowhere and landed. "Really, Snotlout?" he asked skeptically, then turned to me. "No dragon can fly with a weight of five thousand pounds, especially a creature with wings as large as a Nightmare's," he explained. "Hookfang is around two to three hundred pounds at the most, thanks to his hollow bones, which allows him to be light enough to fly."

Thank Valhalla for the Siren. He was a goldmine of information.

"Interesting," I murmured, gazing at Hookfang as he looked impatiently on at the conversation. "So how does the whole lighting-on-fire thing work with a Monstrous Nightmare?" I asked Batwings, now totally ignoring Snotlout.

He butted in, clearly trying to outdo the Siren. "It's his sweat," Snotlout explained exasperatedly. "It's what lights him on fire! But I use it on date nightsâ€¦ girls seem to like the way it smells."

I honestly almost vomited. Batwings was amused by Snotlout's flirting attempts from the look of him. "He can even light up on command," he said idly. "But he usually won't." Snotlout scowled at these words. "Pig-headed dragonâ€¦" he muttered.

Hookfang picked him up in his jaws and threw him at least thirty feet. "Must have been hard for you to pick up _that_ sack of five thousand pounds, huh Hookfang?" Batwings commented, and to my surprise, I found that actually funny. Hookfang did too, from the look of his reaction.

"I don't mean to brag or anything," the Siren said then, dipping his head with honest modesty, "but I know a lot about dragons. If you have any other questions, I can answer them if you want."

My eyes shone at this naïve little dragon, giving away his secrets as if he didn't want them. "Yes, I have a lot of questions!" I exclaimed eagerly. "All of these different kinds of dragons intrigue me, there's so much for me to ask!"

Batwings chuckled and led me deeper into the village. "Well, Snaketail has a Grapple Grounder, Arachne has a Skrill, I have dear Nightshadeâ€¦"

I smirked inwardly as the Siren prattled on. _He thinks he can trust me, _I thought triumphantly. _Imagine his reaction when he realizes that for the first time in his life, his famous "Siren's intuition" has proved him wrong._

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I just want to say, there is no way the dragons weigh as much as the show says they do. A five-thousand pound dragon wouldn't even be able to get off the ground. And don't mention the Red Death, I know it contradicts my beliefs.

But seriously.

Anyway, I've got two things for you readers to guess at! Fun, right?

So here are the questions â€" what episode will I do after Part 4 (Hint: It's one of the episodes I skipped over), and which lucky guy will end up pairing up with Heather in the end; Snotlout, Tuffnut, Fishlegs, or â€" Odin forbid â€" even Batwings?

The suspense! The intrigue! Feel free to swamp me with guesses! Oh, and requests are welcome as well.

**Guess the first, and you'll get a virtual cookie; guess the second,

and you'll get a virtual pie; guess both, and you'll get a virtual cake!**

Review, and watch and wait for the result!

33. A Turn for the Catastrophic

Part two, and I'm already greatly enjoying myself. So let's get on with the story!

(Any suggestions for the title of the next part?）

Ferdoos: Heh heh, Snaketail would kill her, if you get my drift.

Matt: A hallucinogenic dragon? Interesting idea, I think I could use that.

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Hiccup's House

Hiccup was outdoors playing with Toothless and Nightshade. Batwings, bless his naïve little soul, was off helping the chief with his duties. Closing the door after making sure that Hiccup was preoccupied, I grinned to myself. Free reign at last.

Instinctively moving quietly, I snuck up the stairs to Hiccup's room. Now where did he keep that book the others had mentioned? As leader of the Berk Dragon Academy, I figured that Hiccup would logically have the book somewhere close byâ€| but where?

I investigated the first likely hiding place that caught my eye â€" Hiccup's bag. I rummaged through it thoroughly, but with no luck. All that was in there was a few of his sketchbooks and a piece of charcoal.

Then I searched his writing desk, with similar results. Then I searched behind Toothless' bed, under his pillow, in his closet â€" all fruitless. _Was I wrong? Did he maybe keep the book locked up in the Academy?_ If so, then I'd have a significantly harder time getting my hands on it.

As I kept searching, and kept ending up with nothing. I started to think â€" what if I asked Batwings to take Nightshade for a ride? Then I could find the book, even if it was locked in the arena, simply by digging through the rock. I snorted and thought amusedly, _Then again, I could just ask him to take a look at the Book of Dragons. He'd probably hand over his own wings if I asked him to. Not that I need them, of course._

Just then, a thought struck me. I ducked down to the floor, peering under Hiccup's bed. Sure enough, there it was â€" the answer to all of my problems. "Gotcha," I muttered, taking out the book and flipping to the first page.

"Now where is the dragon I wantâ€|?" I turned each page, not missing a single one. I whispered the name of each dragon as I looked through the book â€" "Monstrous Nightmare, Changewing, Gravekeeper,

Blundertailâ€| here we go!" I suddenly crowed triumphantly.

The dragon I had found was exactly the one I wanted. The Skrill. I read quietly to myself, "Flesh-ripping spines on its tail. White-hot fire that rivals the Night Fury's. Speed off the charts, rides lightning bolts, skin carries deadly electricity. Loyal, intelligent" â€"

"And of course, dangerous." I froze, hands tightening on the book. I cautiously turned my head to meet the caustic stare of none other than Astrid. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

I glanced around, heart sinking. She was by no means alone â€" Hiccup stood beside her, looking at me with bewilderment. Toothless was also there, head tilted as he watched me curiously. Nightshade was coiled around the rafter above my head, hissing a soft warning. And to top that all off, Batwings was perched on Hiccup's headboard, an obvious question present in his eyes.

Surrounded. Caught in the act. What could I do?

-.-.-.-.-..

(Hiccup's POV)

Just as Astrid had predicted, we found Heather off in a corner, flipping through the Book of Dragons. Although she had indeed been right, I honestly couldn't find anything wrong with what she was doing. Sure, she should have asked before reading my book, but was there anything really suspicious about learning? Heather was really curious about the dragons, and I admired that.

"Well, are you going to say something?" Astrid pressed her as she looked up at us with frightened, jade-green eyes. I noticed again that I had never seen quite a color like that before. But now, Heather stood up and smoothed down her vest, dutifully handing me the Book of Dragons.

"I am so sorry, Hiccup," she said, turning away guiltily. "I was cleaning your room and found the book. I couldn't help myself! I had no idea I wasn't allowed to read itâ€|" I frowned, which soon became a reassuring smile as I patted her gently on the back. "It's fine, Heather," I said. "It's OK."

Batwings piped up from his perch, "No one's blaming you." He met Astrid's glare with one of his own, then corrected himself, "Okay, I guess I can't speak for her." His voice carried a definite note of anger in it.

"What do you mean, 'it's OK'?" Astrid asked me. "She's reading the Book of Dragons!" I grew annoyed and shot back, "And what the Hel, exactly, is wrong with that?"

Astrid crossed her arms and retorted, "It's wrong because she's sneaking around and looking at our stuff!" I frowned again, looking from Astrid's livid face to Heather's sad one and back again. "Sneaking around? What are you talking about?" Batwings asked with a frown of his own.

"I'm talking about last night," Astrid said, directing her anger, once more, at Heather. Batwings cocked his head with confusion, and I unconsciously did as well. "Near my house?" she prompted further, trying to get Heather to speak.

She did after a second. "That was indeed me," she confessed. "I couldn't sleep, so I went for a walk through the village. I was having the most terrible dreamsâ€¦" she trailed off and I felt another pang of pity for her.

"I'll bet," I murmured, tucking the Book of Dragons back under my bed and then putting a comforting arm around Heather's shoulders. "I can't believe this is happeningâ€¦" Astrid muttered under her breath, storming out of the room.

"Sorry about that," I said, embarrassed. "No, I'm the one that should apologize," Heather insisted. "I was wrong to look at your book without asking first."

Batwings waved off her apology as he hopped to the window. "Don't worry about it," he said nonchalantly. "We trust you."

Neither of us realized how badly things would spin out of control because of those three words.

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****Astrid and Arachne's House (Heather's POV)****

I had one shot at this. I needed to gain the trust of and befriend a dragon so I could make my escape when the time came. And because Hiccup had the fastest dragon ever known, I had no choice but to try and befriend the next best thing.

Rilebolt, the little girl's Skrill.

I smiled at the memory of the Siren perched above me, singing me off into a dreamless sleep. He had offered to do so after I had lied about having nightmares, and I had accepted. Before drifting off, I noticed that it had taken him a considerable amount of effort to get me unconscious. _No doubt he'll be wondering about that,_ I thought smugly as the house I was looking for came into view.

I crept up to the house, where the two Nadders were curled up alongside one another on the grass. Rilebolt was off on her own, hanging by her tail from the carved Nadder figurehead up on the roof. Knowing that the dragon wouldn't be happy to be woken up, I picked up the basket of chicken that I had brought with me and cautiously advanced.

The Skrill's glowing, cat-like eyes suddenly opened. She dropped to the ground, standing on her feet and wing claws. "Approach the Skrill slowly, stay in the blind spot," I recited, taking tentative steps forward. Rilebolt suddenly shrieked loudly as I took a third step, standing on her hind legs and flaring her wings threateningly.

Her tail whipped out from nowhere, stopping an inch from my neck and displaying impressively sharp spines running down its length. I had no doubt what the angry dragon would do with them, given half a chance. I reached down and held out a chicken leg. "I hear that you

like this," I murmured, and the Skrill lowered herself back down onto all fours.

Hesitantly, Rilebolt opened her jaws and wrenched the leg from my hand. Chewing loudly, the Skrill chirped her thanks and allowed me to pat her snout.

And that was when Astrid's acidic voice rang out into the cool night air. "What are you doing with my sister's dragon?" she demanded, stomping up to me. _Not subtle in the least, _I thought disapprovingly. _But then again, maybe she doesn't have to be._

"You like to sneak up on people, it seems," I growled. "Only the ones that deserve it," she shot back. "And don't even think of giving me your Little-Miss-Innocent routine."

I ducked my head so that only my smirk remained visible. "I wouldn't dream of it," I replied. "You're too smart for that. Too smart for my tastes."

Our conversation was interrupted by Rilebolt nudging me. The Skrill curled her tail around me protectively, hissing at Astrid. My smirk grew wider. "I think this dragon likes me. See you, Riley."

I turned and fled into the shadows, leaving an incensed Astrid and a disappointed Skrill behind.

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****Berk Woods (Astrid's POV)****

I hurled my axe at another tree, and the blade hit it dead center. It was nice to see that my aim was perfect as always.

"Ugh, that Heather. 'I think this dragon likes me,'" I mocked bitterly. "No one messes with me and my friends." Taking aim at another tree, I suddenly heard a twig snap, and the sound of rustling bushes.

I ducked behind a shrub and peered out through the leaves. A black-haired figure was darting from tree to tree, keeping to the shadows. I gritted my teeth and followed quietly. I could be stealthy when I wanted to.

The journey didn't go on for long. It ended at the same beach that we had found Heather originally â€" the land bridge was there, so we were both able to cross safely. Once there, I stayed out of sight as Heather settled herself on a flat rock and stared off into the distance.

I waited for a few minutes. "This is stupid," I finally muttered. "The one time I follow her, she doesn't do anything suspiciousâ€" I turned to leave â€" when a strange, out-of-place sound caught my attention. I ducked behind my rock again.

I saw something I hadn't noticed before. A small boat was heading toward the shore, carrying only a single person that grunted as he rowed through the calm waves. The boat was adorned with a Nightmare skull at the bow. "That's an Outcast boat!" I muttered to myself, a suspicion far worse than any I had so far beginning to creep through

my mind.

The man jumped ashore, and suddenly, I was able to recognize him. It was Savage, Alvin the Treacherous' terrible second-in-command. "What have you learned about the dragons?" His rough voice cut through the otherwise peaceful atmosphere. "I've learned a lot," Heather confirmed, voice just loud enough for me to hear from this distance. "But there's something else, something that'll make Alvin happy."

Oh no. It couldn't be true.

Heather continued after having been given a nod from Savage. "They have a book. And inside, they've written everything! Everything Alvin will need to know in order to control dragons."

Savage looked skeptical. "Where is it then?" he asked harshly. "I don't have it yet," Heather replied, just a little bit nervously. "But I will soon! Just trust me â€" if Alvin can wait just a little bit longer, it'll all be worth it."

The Outcast seemed to consider, and then slowly nodded. He waved Heather off, climbing back into his ship for the long trip back home.

Heather dashed off, immediately slipping into the darkness. I had other plans, and ran for the village, eager to get there first and warn the others.

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****Hiccup's House (Hiccup's POV)****

I was in the middle of a dream about flying Toothless across the sea, the morning sun causing the water below me to sparkle and shine. But suddenly, a Terrible Terror zoomed in from nowhere with a squeaky screech, slamming into my side painfully and causing me to lose my balance. I shouted in fear, hands grabbing at nothing as I fell toward a watery demise belowâ€|

â€| and then Astrid kicked me again, harder this time. "OW!" I yelped, instantly waking Toothless and Batwings up. "Why would you do that? What in Odin's name are you doing?"

Astrid's eyes were both angry and desperate. "Saving our hides!" she hissed. "I just saw Heather talking to _Savage_. She's working with the _Outcasts_!"

I rubbed my eyes. "What?" I asked tiredly, wondering if I was hearing things. Batwings didn't even look up from his lying-down position on a rafter, folding his arms behind his head and saying grumpily, "Right. Hilarious, Astrid. What's next â€" Mildew feeding the dragons and scratching their chins behind our backs? Or Rilebolt mating with Toothless?" The Night Fury gave a harsh growl of disgust and turned away, insulted.

His sarcasm was enough to push Astrid over the edge. She kicked a pillar with all her might, causing the rafter to tremble and Batwings to tumble to the ground. "Owâ€|" he muttered. "Come on, you know better than that. I trust her."

Astrid snorted as I slowly sat up. "Trust her, or just trying to suck up to her like the other lovesick boys?" she demanded, and Batwings blanched. "Th-that's ridiculous," he protested. "If you haven't noticed, I'm a _dragon_. She's a _human_. Do the math."

I pushed my way between them. "Astrid, seriously, what am I missing?" I asked, slowly growing more alert. She snorted and answered me in a tone of voice that suggested that she thought of me as stupid. "First problem â€" the Siren over there is in love with 'the pretty one'. Second problem â€" and the far more worrying problem â€" is that she's _working for Alvin_!"

I looked from one aggressive face to the other. "Don't be ridiculous, Astrid," I said. "Like Batwings said, he's a dragon. And Heather's upstairs sleeping."

She looked smug as she gestured to the stairs. "Yeah?" she challenged. "Let's go have a look for ourselves then." Astrid marched up the stairs without another word. "She's delusional," muttered Batwings, examining himself for bruises. But he followed.

At the top of the stairs, we found â€" surprise! â€" Heather sound asleep, taking slow, peaceful breaths. "You were saying, Astrid?" Batwings asked, voice dripping with so much sarcasm that it practically formed a puddle on the floor. "It's like the boy that cried wolfâ€" He continued muttering to himself as he fluttered down the stairs to continue his rest.

I followed close behind him, glancing at Astrid with raised eyebrows. Reluctantly, the outraged girl went downstairs as well. "Astrid, don't you think it's possible that you saw something else?" I asked as we went outside. "I mean, it's pretty dark out there."

Astrid held a hand to her forehead as if she had a headache. "Hiccup, I know what I saw. That girl is not who you think she is!" Her voice almost cracked, and her gaze softened until it seemed almost desperate.

"Then who is she?" I asked skeptically. "I don't know!" she said in resignation. "No one does! You don't think it's strange that she mysteriously washed up on our beach?" I shook my head, honestly bewildered.

She sighed and turned away. "I'm sorry I bothered you with all of this," she said, and her voice actually broke this time. Then she ran, leaving me and my scattered, confused feelings behind.

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****Morning****

"Dad, have you seen the book?" I asked him that morning as he gathered up the potatoes that he had harvested from our garden. "You'll have to be a little more specific, son," he replied. "The Book of Dragons!" I told him. "I can't find it anywhere and I need it for today's class."

Stoick shook his head and threw the last potato into the sack. "I'm

not sure, Hiccup," he said. "Maybe Fishlegs has it, you know he likes" â€" Suddenly, the door slammed open, causing Toothless to look up in alarm.

"She's gone!" cried Astrid. "Who is?" Stoick asked, taking charge. He was the chief after all, and if there was a crisis than he needed to know about it. Astrid started growing from upset to enraged as she spat out, voice growing more ragged with each word, "Rilebolt! Little Miss Innocent stole my little sister's dragon, and she's on her way to Outcast Island as we speak!"

Everything I thought I knew about Heather evaporated to be replaced by this one truth. "Get the others," I told her. "Dad, you tell the village about this, they might need to know just in case." He nodded, grabbed his potatoes, and exited.

"This is bad," I muttered. "I'll go get Batwings and bring him up to speed." Astrid looked even more enraged at that sentence. "No you won't," she seethed. "Because our lovesick dragon friend is gone too."

Less than ten minutes later, we were all gathered at the Academy. Arachne was sobbing and Snaketail was trying to comfort her. "This is very, very bad," worried Fishlegs. "This is worse than bad! This is catastrophic! If Alvin gets that bookâ€"!"

I interrupted his worried rant as I gently led Arachne away from Snaketail. Toothless nuzzled her and warbled sympathetically. "He won't," I told Fishlegs determinedly. "How could I have not seen this?" I added to myself. "Because your brain was under siege," Tuffnut said bluntly.

"Do you even know what that means?" I asked him sarcastically. "Yes," he replied indignantly. "Maybeâ€" noâ€" It's bad, right?"

Astrid glared at me heatedly as she replied, "Yes, it is." I opened my mouth, but she cut me off. "Save the apology for when you get my sister's dragon back."

I hoisted Arachne onto Stormfly's back, and Astrid and I climbed onto Toothless. "Let's go!" I called. "We can't let Heather and Batwings reach Outcast Island."

-.-.-.-.-

****Sky Over the Open Ocean (Heather's POV)****

Rilebolt was definitely difficult to control â€" at least at first. Arachne had warned me that the Skrill was one of the hardest dragons to tame, and subsequently ride. But I had figured out how to calm her down quickly enough.

"Whoa, easy girl!" I gasped, holding onto the saddle tightly as Rilebolt made another attempt to buck me off. I fumbled in my bag for a chicken leg, which Riley enthusiastically swallowed. She leveled out and increased her speed.

Tightening my grip on the Book of Dragons, I grinned at how easy this mission had been. I was fairly sure that no one had seen me take off on Rilebolt with the book in hand. Certainly, though, I owed Hiccup

and his friends a big thank-you for all the help they'd given me.

"Come on, Riley, just a little bit further," I coaxed the dragon. Just a few more miles of flying, and I'd have reached my goal. But perhaps if I had been a bit more attentive, I would have heard the flapping of dragon wings only a few leagues behind me.

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(Hiccup's POV)

"There she is, dead ahead!" I yelled out, pointing to a flying dragon in the distance ahead of us. "We'll never catch her!" Astrid called. "Rilebolt's too fast!" I looked over my shoulder and responded, "When Arachne's riding her, definitely. But not with a stranger."

"Where's Batwings? I don't see him anywhere!" Fishlegs said. Snotlout shaded his eyes with a hand as we flew into the rising sun. "I see her, she's picking up speed!" he called. I stared ahead determinedly as I said, "Those things don't matter. She will be so sorry that she ever helped me with Toothless' speed."

I clicked the stirrup, and we slowed down in midflight, with Toothless raising his wings and with a single thrust, he took off like a bolt shot from a crossbow. Astrid held on tightly as the Night Fury rapidly left the others eating his wake.

Toothless' rising screech prompted Heather to look back. Her features quickly came into focus as we gained ground. But at the last possible minute, she threw a chicken leg into Rilebolt's waiting maw, and the Skrill put on an abrupt burst of speed. Toothless slowed down from his own previous burst, and Rilebolt flashed ahead.

"Was that chicken?" I asked Astrid. "Is that what Arachne's?" "Are we really going to talk about this now?" she interrupted, and I shook my head. "I'll try to get you in close," I said instead, and urged Toothless after his archenemy.

Rilebolt dove and dodged, whirled and twirled through the air with all the speed she was known for. We kept pace with every move, Toothless even getting close enough to bite at her tail. The Skrill pulled it away at the last second and slapped him in the face with it, speeding ahead again. I heard her growl quietly, apparently to Heather, as we pursued further.

That was when Heather suddenly turned the Skrill around and attacked, Toothless barely dodging the Skrill's tackle. I shouted as I dove after them, calling for Toothless to use his plasma blast. He shot three blue fire bolts that streaked past Rilebolt and exploded, causing the dragon to rear back and momentarily halt her flight. Now was our chance.

Toothless bit down on the Skrill's tail and yanked hard, at the same time grunting as her tail spines cut his mouth. Rilebolt shrieked in pain and shot a plume of white fire in our direction. Safely getting out of the way, we rose above them, and Astrid stood up.

"Keep him steady!" she cried as below us, Heather turned Rilebolt

around again and continued her course. With a yell, she jumped off Toothless' back and straight down onto Rilebolt's.

I kept Toothless parallel with Rilebolt as Astrid grabbed Heather's arm and attempted to wrench her off the dragon. She retaliated with a kick that almost sent Astrid over the edge. Crouching on the base of Rilebolt's tail and gripping it for support, she suddenly lunged, grabbing Heather's shoulders this time. "This is going to be awesome!" sang Tuffnut as the others caught up.

As the two girls grappled below me, Snaketail flew up to me and called, "I hate being the voice of doom, but we're approaching Outcast territory!" I averted my gaze to the horizon and saw the jagged peaks of Outcast Island rising through the morning mist.

"Astrid, you might want to hurry things along!" I shouted down to her. She grunted as Heather wrapped a hand around her neck and tried to keep her fist at bay with the other. "Give me a minute!" she choked out. "She's stronger than she looks!"

She whipped her free hand out at Heather's face, only to have the other girl avoid it. The next blow actually connected with a harsh slap, but Heather only got angry. She lunged out with the only weapon she could use at the moment — her teeth. She bit down hard on Astrid's hand, drawing blood. At the same time, she increased her grip on Astrid's neck, trying to strangle her.

As we neared Outcast Island, the soldiers started to take notice of us silhouetted against the dawn sky. One of their catapults took their first shot, and the flaming boulder just missed us. A hail of them began to sizzle through the sky.

I glanced back down worriedly. Astrid had ripped Heather's hand free from her neck and grabbed both of her arms. "Don't you ever mess with my sister's dragon again!" she growled, hurling the other girl over Rilebolt's back. My heart leapt into my throat as both Heather and the Book of Dragons plummeted toward the raging waters below.

I was about to steer Toothless down, when something happened — out of the white-crested waves surged a serpentine monster that streaked upwards and snapped its jaws around Heather.

I settled back down. It was Batwings! He fell into formation with us as we turned back around, away from Outcast Island. He grinned at us, the gaps in his teeth revealing Heather clutching the Book of Dragons in one hand and hanging onto one of his teeth for dear life with the other.

But then, one of the soldiers on the island behind us got a lucky shot. A bolas came spinning through the air at us, and before I could warn anyone, it snagged Batwings' tail. As the appendage folded in on itself, the Siren became unable to fly properly. He screeched, spitting Heather and the book into the air as he plummeted down to Outcast Island.

Without my urging, Toothless flashed down toward the water, and I successfully caught Heather. Fishlegs went after the book, this time without the usual complaints about Meatlug's lesser aerodynamics and maneuverability being a hindrance in these situations. He held out

his hand for the falling book desperatelyâ€|

And a flaming boulder missed him by inches. Meatlug pulled up in a panic, and Fishlegs missed the Book of Dragons as it fell open on the rocks below. Another boulder came at him, and Meatlug dodged it. Fishlegs yelped as a stray ember burnt his arm, and he steered Meatlug away and back into our flight formation.

We spent a few minutes in silence as we left the cheering Outcasts behind. Heather was quiet, likely not willing to risk giving us an excuse to dump her in the ocean. Astrid was riding Rilebolt, now calm with a familiar rider. Toothless gurgled sadly, his mouth oozing blood. "Please tell me you got it!" I yelled over to Fishlegs.

Tears streamed down his face and Meatlug gurgled with a mix of guilt and sympathy. "No," Fishlegs sobbed. "Alvin has the Book of Dragons now."

From the distant island behind us, the piercing, desperate screech of a Siren echoed across the calm morning sky.

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****Things are rapidly flying out of control for our heroes. Alvin has the Book of Dragons, Batwings is captured â€" perhaps even dead â€" and everyone is losing hope.****

****But they can't lose hope yet! This little bit of the "Legends are Born" storyline is only half over!****

****Speaking of which â€" my two questions from the previous chapter are still open for debate. Guess away, readers!****

****R+R, and see you soon.****

34. The Fiendishly Clever Plan

****Now, technically this would be a new episode, but considering that "Heather Report" is a two-part storyline, I think that this chapter is deserving of its own unique title instead of the unimaginative "Heather Report: Part 2".****

****Matt: I'm sure anyone, regardless of gender, would think that. Take the little cactus wren for example â€" it looks like a cute, harmless songbird, but it demolishes the nests of other birds whenever the opportunity arises.****

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****Berk Village (Heather's POV)****

I was roughly shoved into my cell for the tenth time this week. My crime â€" trying to steal the Book of Dragons and bring it to the Outcasts. My jailer â€" Hiccup the Dragon Trainer's moronic, rude, and just-plain-infuriating girlfriend, Astrid.

"You can escape as many times as you would like," she sneered, "but you are not leaving this island for a long time." I felt a sudden rage and lashed out with my fist, but it instinctively opened at the

last second. Still, I was very satisfied at the long gashes in Astrid's cheek that my nails made.

"Give it up, Heather," Astrid said simply, slamming the cell door. "We have dragons." She turned to walk away, and my rage evaporated. I grew desperate. "Please, I have to get back to Outcast Island!" I protested.

Astrid snorted. "Suuuure you do," she said sarcastically. "You don't understand!" I continued, voice rising with panic. "Alvin has my parents! I have to save them!"

The flicker of fury that Astrid's skeptical glance sparked was only minor. "What happened to the 'pirates'?" she challenged, referring to the lie I had told when we had first met. "I made it up, I admit it!" I shrieked from both anger and desperation. "I needed you to trust me!"

If she was affected by my outburst, she didn't show it. "Well guess what?" she told me. "We don't. No one does. Not anymore." Then she began to walk away again.

A name popped into my head, and I frantically clutched at the bars of my cell. "Batwings does," I called after her, remembering that the Siren had trusted me the second we had met. Astrid stopped, not even looking back as she replied, "He's dead now. If he's on Outcast Island, they wouldn't have let him live. And even if he isn't â€" there's no way even he can trust you after what you did."

She shut the door quietly behind her, and my last hope deflated within me.

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****Outcast Island (No POV)****

In the Outcasts' dragon training arena, an anguished roar came from the cage most recently occupied. An emerald eel-like beast crashed against the bars, rattling them noisily but not dislodging them. After more than twenty similar failures, the dragon's hide carried the imprints of the metallic bars on them.

The Siren moaned and retreated back into the shadows, coiling up tightly. How could things have gone so wrong for this particular dragon? One minute, he was rescuing the girl he, impossibly, still trusted from plummeting into Outcast waters â€" the next, his tail had been snagged and he had been forced to land himself.

But worst of all were the thoughts of confusion and self-doubt that swirled around his mind like a whirlpool. His intuition, notorious for never being wrong, had told him to trust the girl that had arrived on Berk. He followed along with it, getting along with her as if they had been lifelong friends.

Then things had started to spiral out of control. The dragon found himself growing feelings for this girl â€" a human girl. And then, shockingly, it was revealed that this girl had been working for the Outcasts, his friends' mortal enemies. When he had found this out, he had chased after her.

And that was how this Siren had found himself in a tight, uncomfortable cage guarded by barbaric maniacs. Now, one singular thought pounded relentlessly, maddeningly on his brain " _How can I trust myself after this? After my intuition was proven wrong? After it told me to do the wrong thing? Just how can I trust myself now?_

Batwings coiled up a little tighter and hid his head within the coils so any passing Outcasts wouldn't be able to see him crying.

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****Arena (Hiccup's POV)****

I gave Snotlout the signal, and he fired a good-sized rock from his miniature catapult at the hovering Fishlegs' back. Just before it would have hit, Meatlug turned around and swallowed the rock whole, smacking her jaws delightedly. "That was a little close, Snotlout!" he called down. "Quit your whining, Chicken-legs!" the boy retorted, calling him by the name he usually reserved for the timid Fishlegs.

Meatlug spat the rock, now superheated into a ball of fire, right at Snotlout's catapult. He dove out of the way with a scream as the catapult exploded in a conflagration of fire and wood. "Cut that out!" he roared. "Quit your whining, Snotlout," Fishlegs mocked.

"That was good, guys!" I congratulated them as I rode on Toothless. "But remember, the Outcasts aren't going to be coming one at a time." Fishlegs said nervously, "You don't need to remind me, I'm under enough stress."

We were training for when we went to get our Book of Dragons back from Alvin, or in the worst case scenario, when the Outcasts attacked Berk whilst riding their own dragons. Several of the adult Vikings were watching us, hoping to pick up a few good tips for their dragon mounts as well.

"Remember," I told everyone, "we're only going to have one shot at getting the Book of Dragons back!" Fishlegs zoomed off, muttering to himself, "Did I not make myself clear about the stress?"

Barf and Belch flew by just then, creating a mist of gas and then lighting it. The wave of fire swept right toward Snotlout and Hookfang " the Monstrous Nightmare lit itself on fire to defend, and Snotlout leapt aside for the second time in as many minutes.

"You're supposed to time it perfectly!" Snaketail called as Horrorcow demolished three training dummies with her close combat skills. "Oops," replied Tuff. "Still working on the kinks."

Meanwhile, Hookfang was busy raging as his body remained wreathed in fire, stomping around and roaring deafeningly. A few of the adults ran a safe distance away as he came toward them. "Can you calm him down, Snotlout?" Astrid yelled. "Fine," he replied, charging at Hookfang with a yell. Before any of us could stop him, he wrestled Hookfang to the ground and slammed his horns onto the rock

floor.

"Figured that one out yesterday," he bragged as Hookfang's tongue lolled out contentedly. "He loves it." Fishlegs and Meatlug landed as the large boy asked, "He likes having his horns slammed into the ground?"

Ruffnut piped up, "Sure. Tuffnut does." Tuff looked at her in confusion. "What? I do?" Then he yelled as Ruff jumped from Barf's neck and threw her twin off Belch's. His head was slammed into the floor with an audible *clang*!

"Oh yeah," he mumbled, dazed. "That does feel kinda nice." Astrid rolled her eyes. "Can we get on with it?" she yelled. "There could be a whole army coming at us!"

She chuckled an axe at a distant target, but something immediately went wrong. Her arm seemed to seize up at the last second, causing her to cry out in pain and hurl the axe at an odd angle. It flew at the target, but clanged off the wall beside it and fell to the ground with a clatter.

"Are you all right, Astrid?" I yelped, goading Toothless over to her. Astrid drew a sharp breath as her arm involuntarily moved again, and she clutched it as if it had been wounded. "Nothing like this has ever happened before," I continued, "You sure you're okay?"

She looked at me, a question coming to light in her eyes. "I have no idea what it is!" she said almost desperately, then winced again and tightened her grip on the arm. "Ever since Heather bit my hand, my entire arm's been flaring up in pain."

I frowned; that was really weird. "Maybe it just got infected," Snaketail suggested. "Did you consider going to Goathi?" Astrid looked thoughtful as she replied, "Yeah, I didn't think of that. I'll go after this training session's finally over."

Snotlout got on Hookfang again and said, "Well? We're waiting." In response, Stormfly rose into the air and hovered there. Astrid gave Arachne the signal, and her sister rose into the air as well on her Skrill's back. Rilebolt fired a plume of deadly white fire, and shockingly (pardon the pun) the fire was infused with electricity.

"Spines, Stormfly!" Astrid commanded, and the Nadder flung five spines through the blaze. They came out crackling with heat and lightning, embedding themselves in the wall. One of them speared Tuffnut's helmet, still blazing. "Kinda like that, too," he told us as his body was jolted with tiny shocks from the spine.

"That could work really well," I commented. "Arachne, when could Rilebolt spit lightning?" Astrid's little sister landed and grinned, "I figured that one out yesterday too!"

The second Arachne and I had dismounted from our respective dragons, the Night Fury and Skrill leapt at each other, shrieking in rage and trying to claw their foes' eyes out. Everyone instantly shot into action, trying to separate the two dragons before they started using fire (and in Rilebolt's case, lightning).

All week, at every opportunity, Toothless and Rilebolt had been fighting each other without mercy. Ever since Heather had used Rilebolt to fly to Outcast Island, the two had forged a new, stronger hatred of each other. Although none of us could be sure, Toothless seemed to blame Rilebolt for willingly joining Heather and the Outcasts, and the Skrill seemed to be insulted by that. Without Batwings being able to translate for us, though, we couldn't know for sure.

We got the dragons under control relatively easily this time. "You know, all this training is good and all," Fishlegs told me, "but Alvin obviously isn't going to just hand the book over to us."

Before I could reply, Astrid said with a smirk, "But maybe he'll hand it over to Heather." A skeptical grin spread across my face. There was no way Heather would go along with it, and no one on the entire island would approve of letting her go after what she did.

"I think Astrid's been eating dragon nip again," muttered Snaketail, and said girl was immediately punched in the stomach. "Why is it always violence with you?" she exclaimed, outraged. "It isn't violence, its communication," Astrid smirked at her.

I held up a hand for quiet. "Are you suggesting that we let Heather go? After everything she did?" Astrid grinned. "Sort of," she said slyly.

"Yep, definitely dragon nip," Fishlegs agreed.

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****Evening****

After Astrid had explained her plan, we had agreed with varying degrees of reluctance that it was a good one. Thus, the day of hard work had begun. We had spent all day gathering materials and using them to build a very small sailboat. Now, after the sun had set already, we were almost ready to go.

"Th-this is going to work, right?" Fishlegs asked me. "B-Because if it doesn't w-work, A-Alvin's gonna know all our d-dragon secrets! A-And if Alvin knows all our dragon s-secrets" â€" "Fishlegs!" I shouted, breaking him out of his nervous rant. "It'll work." He took a deep breath and began muttering, "It'll work, it'll work, it'll work," repeatedly under his breath.

The sound of distant footsteps arrived on the beach. I sighed, "Ah, that must beâ€"|" I trailed off as a figure melted out of the shadows, Heather style.

"Heather!" finished Tuffnut. "Get her!" Ruffnut agreed, and the two dashed at her. "That rhymes!" Tuff exclaimed as he pounced. The figure was thrown to the ground as the twins landed on her.

"You. Must. Stay. In. Your. Cell!" the male twin shouted as the figure struggled. "How many times do we have to tell you?!" Then he was mercilessly punched in the face, and the figure used her now-free arm to rip Ruffnut off of her.

"It's me, you mutton-heads!" Astrid raged, sitting up. "Wow," muttered Ruff. Indeed, the girl looked almost identical to Heather, right down to the hairstyle and even the clothes, with the brown vest sitting over top of the light green shirt.

"Oh, sorry Astrid," Tuff said bluntly. "That disguise is totally convincing." She stalked off, muttering in response, "Yeah, I could tell."

"You sure about this?" I asked as she was about to get on the boat. Astrid stopped and looked at me worriedly. "No," she admitted. "But it's our only chance. You don't need to shadow me like you always do, you know," she added. My smile dropped as I said, "It'll make me feel better."

Astrid snorted. "Fine. But if Alvin sees you, it'll all be over." I shrugged. "Don't worry about it," I told her. "We'll be fine. Just get the book and get out of there. We'll be waiting for you."

She smiled and blushed. There was an awkward moment of silence before she stepped forward and lightly kissed me. We separated after a few seconds and Astrid got on the boat. Just before Fishlegs pushed it into the water, I murmured, "Stay safe."

Astrid nodded, and then the boat was carried away by the tide.

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****Berk Village (Heather's POV)****

Night had fallen, and I knew that someone would be coming by with a meal before I was supposed to turn in with everyone else on the island. But I was determined this time to escape. My parents "and Batwings if he was indeed alive" were counting on me.

Better yet, I had overheard Astrid and the others going on about some plan to get the Book of Dragons back tonight. I snorted to myself. _Considering they're cautious enough to keep me in this cage twenty-four-seven, one would think they'd be careful enough to be a little more secretive about their plans._

Footsteps occurred, and I could hear humming coming from down the corridor. _Bucket again._ I got into position, kicking off my boots and climbing up onto the wall above the cell door with a little effort. Thank goodness I was a good climber.

"Are you hungry?" Bucket called out cheerfully. "We've got a lovely cabbage soup tonight. Yummy!" I heard him pause inches from my door. _Come on, come on,_ I thought, muscles tensed and ready to spring.

"Oh, not again!" Bucket despaired. "Stoick is going to kill me!" He opened the door and walked in, looking around in case I was concealed in a shadowy corner, as I often was. But this corner was different.

I dropped, screaming softly as I slammed into Bucket's back, knocking him out instantly. "Sorry, Bucket," I hissed, slamming the cell door

behind me. "But I have to get to Outcast Island, and nothing is going to stop me."

I instantly made for the little girl's house, knowing I'd find what I wanted there. Just as I thought, Rilebolt was hanging by her tail from the rooftop as usual.

I brushed my hands against Rilebolt's snout. Instantly, her eyes snapped open and she opened her wings with a shriek, at the same time firing a bolt of lightning at me. I dove and the bolt incinerated the wall behind me instead. "OK, never startle a sleeping Skrill," I muttered.

I picked up Arachne's saddle as the Skrill climbed down, growling curiously. "It's OK, girl," I said softly. "It's your old pal Heather. We're going to go on a little trip, that okay?" Rilebolt eyed me, but crouched down and allowed me to strap the saddle to her back.

Now she was looking at me expectantly. "Sorry, no chicken tonight, Riley," I said affectionately. "That wasn't so hard," I added to myself as I climbed aboard. "Now, let's go rescue your rider's friends."

Rilebolt reared up and shrieked to the sky, throwing me momentarily off balance. The dragon galloped off across the yard and rose in flight with eager beats of her strong wings. "Come on girl, let's go!" I said triumphantly, and wheeled off across the night sky to the distant Outcast Island.

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****Outcast Island (Astrid's POV)****

I kept my eye on the map as mist began to rise from the calm water. I should have been getting closer to my destination, but the Odin-damned fog kept interfering with my vision. _I wish I could see where I was going._

It was as if the gods had read my mind, because the fog suddenly lifted and I found myself staring at the jagged mountains of Outcast Island. I gulped, guiding the boat around the rocks that suddenly loomed into view, jutting out of the water like smaller versions of the spires around Hel's Gate.

A green Monstrous Nightmare flew low over the boat, startling me. With a roar, it soared up to the cliffs rising above me. _I forgot, Outcast Island's a dragon nesting ground._

Almost as soon as the boat hit shore, I was met with Savage and three other Outcast soldiers carrying crossbows. I almost panicked. _Keep calm, _ I said to myself. _You aren't a member of the Berk Dragon Academy, remember. You're an Outcastâ€| or at least an ally of them._

"We thought you'd been captured," Savage told me, clearly convinced by my disguise that I was, indeed, Heather. "I was," I said in a high-pitched yet soft voice. "But I managed to get away."

He bent down to examine me, then laughed. "Well, it's good to see you

safe and sound," he chuckled, and turned to the soldiers. "Get rid of her," he said idly. "What?!" I exclaimed before I could stop myself. "We don't need you anymore," Savage explained, turning his back.

I crazy plan popped into my head. "Savage, wait!" I cried. "You do need me! I can prove it! You have the book, right? I've watched and learned from them! That book is only worth something if you know how to use it."

Despite himself, Savage looked interested. _This just might work,_ I thought, satisfied. My bad arm gave a huge jolt of pain, and I winced.

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****Sky Over the Sea (Hiccup's POV)****

"I want to go on record by saying I'm not so sure about this plan, Hiccup," Fishlegs called over. As we flew high above the water toward Outcast Island, each of us carried a sack, a bag, or a basket full of fish — whose use would become very obvious once we got to our destination.

"If you have another one, I'm open," I suggested to him. "I just think that landing in a wild dragon nesting ground is really going to freak Meatlug out," Fishlegs protested, just as his dragon gave an excited sort of growl.

"How does she feel about flaming arrows and catapults?" I asked sarcastically. "Yeah, she doesn't really like those either," Fishlegs said dejectedly. "You don't say," I muttered.

"Tell you what," Snotlout suggested, "when we get there, sit back and let the real dragons do the work." Fishlegs was both indignant and even more nervous than before. "I don't think any of you know what a swarm of wild dragons are capable of!" he called.

Ruff and Tuff came up on either side of him. "Hey, you know what would be really cool?" Tuff asked his sister loudly. She replied nonchalantly, "Flaming arrows, catapults, and wild dragons." Fishlegs shuddered and said nothing from there on out.

About an hour later, we were flying leisurely through the not-so-tricky maze of rock around Outcast Island. It was dead silent, other than the sounds of our dragons' wings. "See that, Fishlegs?" I told him. "You got yourself all worked up for nothing!"

Suddenly, there was a series of growls and shrieks that sounded from the rock spires around us. Then a menagerie of dragons appeared from within their crevasses — Nadders, Nightmares, Gronckles, and even a Changewing, which constantly shifted its colors until it was disorienting to watch.

"Uh, you were saying?" Snaketail asked. "Remember," I called back as Toothless pulled ahead, "stick to the plan, no matter how crazy it gets!" Snotlout whooped in reply, "I love crazy! Bring it on, wild dragons!"

The two flocks — ours and the wild one — flew straight for each other. Just before they would meet, I zoomed upward in a sudden

maneuver and cried, "Now!"

I dropped my basket of fish, letting it fall open. Everyone else followed me up above the dragon flock and let their cargo go as well. The dragons instantly went for the food, snatching up as much as they could.

"Yes, we did it!" cried Snotlout, holding up a single fish in triumph. "Stupid dragons!" he added, taunting the feeding flock behind us. And that was when the Changewing melted out of nowhere and snatched him — or more accurately, snatched the arm that held the fish. Snotlout cried out as he was rapidly towed away.

Toothless and I chased the Changewing as it flew up over a tall rock spire. "Just drop the fish!" I called. "We'll catch you!" Snotlout glowered down at me as if I had just insulted him. "No! That's my dinner!" he shot back. "Just do it!" I yelled, and he let go of his fish. The Changewing didn't even notice as he fell from its grasp and right onto Toothless' back.

I sighed._ This plan had better work,_ I thought, _because it isn't exactly going smoothly so far._

None of us heard the distant and familiar shriek emanating from behind us. Rilebolt and Heather were gaining.

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Wow, I'm on a roll! Two chapters done in one day. This has got to be a new record.

Also, I've got something absolutely wonderful planned for the final part of this little piece of storyline. You'll never see it coming!

So we have a lot to cover in the next chapter — Astrid meeting with Alvin and training dragons, Hiccup and the gang battling the Outcasts, and one of my infamous story twists that'll turn your little worlds inside out.

Review, and wait patiently on the edge of your seats! (OK, that statement kind of contradicted itself.)

35. Trial of the Siren

Guess which two story-changing, unexpected, mind-blowing things happen in this chapter?

OK, never mind. You never will! So let's find out!

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Outcast Island (Astrid's POV)

"What's that on yer 'elmet?" Alvin asked with a chuckle. He put the Book of Dragons down and pointed at Savage's helmet, where there was indeed a glowing spot of heat that I hadn't noticed before.

"Erâ€¦" Savage looked embarrassed. "Lava blast. You might want to read the Gronckle chapter." Alvin indeed flipped to the page and read deeply for a few seconds. I waited patiently, still trying to digest the fact that these brutes _could actually read_.

"This is very interestin'," he said after a minute, putting the book down again. "Now, Heather," he added, staring skeptically at me. "Yeh say that this is complicated, but it looks pretty straightforward ta me."

I stepped forward and argued, "It's anything but straightforward, Alvin." He sniffed and replied, "If there's one thing I know, it's that people will say anything to keep themselves alive. Right, Savage?" He chuckled nervously and piled on, "Absolutely, Alvin. As usual."

Alvin chuckled heartily again. "Ya see? Now, ya say I need you to interpret what's in this book in order ta use it properly. But I say it's nothin' but a ploy."

I smiled innocently at him. "Fine," I offered. "Give it a try." Seemingly put off by my boldness, Alvin scowled and threw the book to one of the guards nearby. "You 'eard the girl!" he said, and motioned to a Puff Nadder that the other Outcasts were trying to restrain.

The Outcast gulped as he opened the book and glanced at the screeching dragon, which flung two of the guards away and stung the third with its tail. "Right, uhâ€¦ What kind of dragon is this?" he asked Alvin, who glanced at me for the answer. Smugly, I replied, "It's a Puff Nadder. Do you need the page number?"

The Outcast flipped through the book and exclaimed with satisfaction. "Nope, nope, right here," he assured us. "Let's seeâ€¦ Puff Nadder. Poisonous, very sure of itself, constant preening." I smiled â€" all Nadders were the same, treating themselves as if they were examples of what every dragon should be like, even if that Nadder had slime coating its skin and an unsightly throat sac.

The Outcast closed the Book of Dragons and said decisively, "Alright, I'll appeal to its pride." Although this was an admirable breakthrough for the brainless barbarian, I still shook my head disappointedly. I could tell that this plan would go wrong.

"Uh," the Outcast began, taking tentative steps toward the Puff Nadder. "Hello there, dragon. Y-You certainly are a lovely girl." The Puff Nadder took notice of him and peered at him, shuffling its feet modestly. "O-Or are you a handsome boy? Because who could tell?"

I facepalmed. _He's dead._

The Puff Nadder shrieked, outraged. It snapped its tail toward him, releasing the spines hidden under its tail flaps. They pierced through the Outcast's armor and pinned him to the far wall, dead in an instant. The Nadder just went back to preening, growling under its breath.

"Like I said," I spoke up, causing Alvin and Savage to tear their eyes away from the soldier. "The book can only get you so far, Alvin." I suddenly winced as my arm throbbed painfully again.

The Outcast leader glanced at me. "What's wrong with yer arm?" he asked. I waved off the pain and said nonchalantly, "Oh, a dragon bit me back on Berk. No big deal."

I didn't know how true those words really were.

"Then if that's the case," Alvin said, referring to my earlier statement, "you can show us how ta do it the right way!" he decided, gesturing to Savage. He led me off down a partially sealed tunnel and shut the door behind me.

I peered back through the wide slot in the door, staring at Alvin. "What?" he demanded. "The book," I said simply. "I need it. I didn't memorize it, after all." With a reluctant growl, he handed it over and waved at me to go through the tunnel.

As I half-suspected, the journey ended at the Outcasts' own dragon training arena. I stepped through the threshold and into the massive space, twice as big as Berk's arena.

Up above, Alvin motioned for Savage to open one of the caged doors. "Please be a Nadder, please be a Nadder!" I prayed to myself, clutching the book to my chest.

The cage opened " and nothing sprang out at me. Nothing even moved. "Not again!" Alvin raged. He pointed to two soldiers and ordered, "You, an' you! Get that lazy dragon outta his cage!"

The two bustled off into the darkness, each gripping wickedly pointed spears. But a second later, there was a plume of bright red fire that blasted out from inside the cage, and the two Outcasts ran for it, frantically trying to pat out the fire that ate at their beards and armor. But their efforts were fruitless " the flames didn't go away.

I caught a glimpse of a glowing, tired-looking, sapphire eye in the blackness, which faded away as the dragon retreated back into its cage. "Leave that cage open!" Alvin commanded. "That stupid lizard can just slither out any time it feels like it! Open that one!" he added, pointing to another cage.

Just like before, I prayed for it to be a Nadder, any kind at all. But the cage door was smashed down by a ferocious, purple-tinged Blundertail. "Oh, great," I muttered, flipping to the Blundertail page in the Book of Dragons.

After reading a little bit " the book said to show the Blundertail a lot of respect and to keep a safe distance " I gingerly approached the massive monster, hand outstretched cautiously. "OK, big boy," I said through clenched teeth at the Blundertail, which circled me warily, also keeping to a respectful distance. "It's you and me now."

Something in my tone must have been disrespectful, or otherwise sparked something in the Blundertail, because it shot a blast of greenish fire from its tail. I narrowly avoided the poisonous projectile and dropped the book. "Alright, check that off the list," I said loudly and with as much confidence as I could. "Time for the direct approach."

I charged with a yell at the Blundertail, grabbing onto its pincer-like foreleg and trying to upend it. It responded by casually flicking its leg out, sending me flying into the wall. "This isn't anything my soldiers haven't tried!" I heard Alvin's shout through my daze. "Yeh'll hafta do better!"

I felt anger slowly take hold of me. Brushing myself off, I muttered, "The one time I wish Snotlout was hereâ€¦" The big arrogant boy was the best at dealing with Stoker-class dragons.

Wait a minute.

"Figured that one out yesterday," he bragged as Hookfang's tongue lolled out contentedly. "He loves it." Fishlegs and Meatlug landed as the large boy asked, "He likes having his horns slammed into the ground?"

The memory echoed in my mind, carrying with it a glimmer of hope. If Snotlout could calm Hookfang down by throwing his head to the ground, maybe it would work for the Blundertail. I charged again at the scorpion-like dragon, this time coming at it head-on. Before it could react, I jumped onto its head and fastened my hands around its two horns curling from the back of its broad head.

The Blundertail reared up and roared deafeningly, shaking around and snapping its massive teeth like a giant bear trap. I kept up my grip, but then I saw the Blundertail suddenly lunge toward the wall. Bracing myself, I grunted as it slammed me into the rock.

I was trapped painfully there for a few seconds. "Well," came Alvin's voice from above me. "That's the end of her."

Oh yeah? I thought. With all my strength, I pushed its head away from the wall, staring defiantly into its eyes. Seeming to sense what I wanted to do, the Blundertail backed further away from the wall, allowing me to slam its head into the ground.

The huge dragon gave a rumbling purr of contentment as its massive tongue flopped out of its jaws and onto the ground. "Didja see that?!" Alvin cheered, laughing. "I told ya she knew what she was doin'!"

Savage sighed. "Yes, you certainly did," he agreed, none too enthusiastically.

I climbed onto the Blundertail's back and clutched its horns for support. "What do you say we get out of here then?" I asked it. Although it couldn't fly, and thus get off the island without another dragon's help, the Blundertail was more than eager to get out of this arena. With a roar, it stood up and scuttled for the exit.

Outcast soldiers appeared suddenly, ready to stop us. The Blundertail responded with a few venomous fire blasts, which scattered them as they hastily made to avoid them.

"Goin' somewhere?" Alvin asked, and I glared up at him. "As far away from this place as possible!" I declared.

Then Savage and another Outcast led two frightened-looking Vikings up

to the edge of the arena. "Without yer parents?" Alvin asked rhetorically. "Parents?" I gasped to myself. "Heatherâ€| was telling the truth?"

Alvin dumped the two into the arena. "I think it's a fair trade fer that book!" he called down. "Either that, or you can leave, an' I'll kill 'em meself!" Heather's parents gave me desperate, fearful looks, clearly thinking that their daughter was about to betray them.

But then, there was a massive â€" and familiar â€" roar. The Outcasts had succeeded in infuriating the mystery dragon enough to get it out of its cage. This time, I gasped for all to hear as a glittering emerald serpent stormed out of the small, dark cave, looking around wildly for those that dared to disturb him.

It was Batwings! "Recognize 'im?" Alvin laughed sarcastically. "It's yer 'little' friend!" Savage joined in the laughter as the Siren suddenly caught sight of me. His gaze softened, and I began to think things would turn out okay â€" and then his eyes hardened, and he shot towards me with a huge screech.

-.--.-.-.

(Hiccup's POV)

We had landed for the moment in a clearing in the middle of the dead forest that surrounded the shores of Outcast Island. It was here that we planned to meet Astrid, eventually.

"Ca-caw, ca-caw!" called Snotlout. "What are you doing?" I asked him wearily as Toothless paced restlessly beside me. "Duh, that's our signal," he said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Guys, we don't give the signal this time. Astrid does! We talked about this." I sat down beside Toothless as I explained.

Fishlegs was fidgeting beside me. "Like any of this matters anyway!" he burst out, wringing his hands. "She's almost an hour late! I never should have let her go, Alvin must have figured out what was going on andâ€|"

He trailed off to stew in his own worry. "The costume sucked, I told you guys," Tuff said, staring up at the sky. "Guys," I said, getting everyone's attention. "She'll be here. It's Astrid."

But deep down, I wasn't feeling so sure of myself. _Come on, Astrid,_ I urged, worried. _What's taking you so long?_

-.--.-.-.

(Astrid's POV)

I was busy figuring out what to do as Alvin walked down into the arena. Batwings hadn't struck at me, but Heather's parents. Clearly, he was also convinced by my disguise, and was coiled around the two of them, the look in his eyes clearly suggesting what he would do to them at a moment's notice.

Alvin gestured to the trapped pair with a sadistic grin. "Well, let's have it," he said, extending a meaty hand for the Book of Dragons.

"Send them over first!" I demanded, not trusting him in the least.

"Fine," he muttered, swatting Batwings. The Siren flinched, then shoved the two over to me, following close behind. Cautiously, Heather's parents approached me, clearly expecting a trap. "Mom, Dad!" I said with mock joy, embracing them.

I looked up at them, my expression fierce. "I'm a friend of Heather's. I'm here to help," I whispered. Batwings heard and bent his head closer. "Astrid?" he asked incredulously. "Is that really you?" I nodded and grinned at the shocked dragon. The Blundertail growled from behind me, a little edgy.

"Ya do realize I'm never gonna let you leave with that book?" Alvin asked rhetorically. "No kidding!" I retorted, then hissed from the corner of my mouth, "When I tell you, drop to the ground. It's about to get really hot in here. Ready, Batwings?" The Siren grinned back at me and replied, "Ready as I'll ever be."

Alvin was growing impatient quickly. "I'm waiting!" he snarled, holding out his hand again. I glared at him defiantly, then threw the book up into the air. "Now! Batwings, grab it!" The Siren lunged at the book as Heather's parent's dropped to the ground. "Sorry, boy," I muttered to the Blundertail, swatting him. Instinctively, the dragon shot a few sizzling blasts of poison fire at the gathered Outcasts, scattering them.

Batwings caught the book in his mouth, but Heather's dad was caught by a bolas flung by Savage. The Blundertail was occupied with the Outcast soldiers that surrounded it. Heather's mom went to help her husband up, and Alvin used the opportunity to smash Batwings in the face, throwing him to the ground as he reflexively spat out the Book of Dragons.

I went for it instantly, but Alvin managed to grab it in one hand as he held me at arm's length by the back of my shirt. He scolded gently, "Heather, Heather, Heather!" then suddenly dropped me and examined his hand. His fingers were covered with soot, the material I had used to dye my hair black.

"Or are yeh?" he asked suspiciously, and Batwings groaned in the background. My heart suddenly sank.

-.-.-.-.-

**** (Hiccup's POV) ****

I was a patient guy, but even I was beginning to grow antsy. I tapped my prosthetic on the ground as the seconds crawled by. Toothless could tell I was succumbing to my nerves and cooed gently, nuzzling me reassuringly. I scratched under his chin half-heartedly and suddenly saw something move on the horizon.

I stood up, and with a thrill of joy and relief, saw Astrid walking towards us from a cliff in the distance. She waved as two other Vikings came up from behind her. "That's the signal!" I cried to the others, instantly breaking them out of their bored torpors. "Who's that with her?" Snaketail asked. "I don't know," I replied, "but let's go!" I climbed aboard Toothless and shot off toward the trio,

my friends close behind.

I landed and ran up to Astrid, hugging her tightly. She smiled and hugged me quickly back, as the two Vikings behind her gave startled shouts at the sight of Toothless. "Who's this?" I asked, stepping back a couple of paces. "Heather's parents," Astrid said with a slight sarcastic edge. "She was telling the truth, just go with the plan."

But what wasn't part of the plan, however, were the Outcast soldiers that suddenly appeared from behind the trees and rocks. "Oi, there they are! Get 'em!" called Alvin, appearing from nowhere and carrying the Book of Dragons.

Toothless and I became surrounded. I motioned for Heather's parents to get behind the Night Fury as Astrid and I stared Alvin down. "Hiccup!" he bellowed in delight. "Bet yer surprised to see me!" I snorted as Toothless growled at him. "Not really," I replied. "This is where you liveâ€| Hey, easy, bud," I added to Toothless as he roared loudly.

"Yeh know, Hiccup," Alvin said with a devious grin, "with this book, yer knowledge of dragons, and my knowledge of warfare, we could make quite the team! How does that sound?" He chuckled.

"Hmm," I pretended to think. "Insane. Demented. Delusional. Stupid." I listed the adjectives on my fingers as I rattled them off, leaving Alvin looking mystified. "Alright," he finally replied. "Yeh'll just hafta agree to disagree. Yer a smart boy, Hiccup. I can't let ya leave the island."

I retorted, "And you're a smart murderous barbarian, Alvin. You know I have a better plan than this." Alvin slapped a fist into his open palm. "So do I!" he replied.

"NOW!" I called over my shoulder, as Alvin echoed me. My friends and their dragons came soaring out of nowhere to do battle with the Outcasts. Hookfang spat fire, Meatlug bashed them with her tail, and Barf and Belch even toyed with the soldiers as they lashed out with their jaws and tail.

Then, as Toothless and I became cornered by the Outcasts already surrounding us, there was a serpent-like streak that flew down from the sky to do battle. "Batwings!" I cried as he scattered the warriors. "Miss me?" he replied over his shoulder as he shapeshifted and quickly slashed with his claws at the retreating Outcasts.

Just then, there was a scream from Fishlegs. Him and Meatlug had become trapped by a weighted net that two soldiers had threw over him. "This wasn't part of the plan, Hiccup!" he cried as Meatlug struggled to get free. The Zippleback twins were lassoed, and their riders thrown from their perches atop their necks. Horrorcow lasted a bit longer with her close combat skills, but fell also. Toothless blasted a soldier with a burst of plasma, but the blast was blocked by his shield.

More soldiers came pouring into the battle, separating Ruff and Tuff from their dragon and driving Hookfang back. Horrorcow got in a lucky shot with her tail, which swatted an Outcast away and allowed her to join up with Snaketail again. But soon, they were driven up against a

wall as six soldiers advanced on them.

"There's too many of them!" Astrid cried as she knocked out an Outcast with his own shield. We were all separated, and surrounded by individual groups of warriors. There was no way we'd be able to get past all of them, and to top it off, there were several Outcasts perched in the trees with crossbows, ready to pick us off if we decided to fly away.

But just then, there was a familiar-sounding screech up above. Everyone on the battlefield looked up simultaneously to see a black-purple dragon circling above us at an immense speed. "It's Rilebolt!" Astrid called, as Stormfly miraculously appeared as well. The Nadder swooped down to pluck the net off of Fishlegs and Meatlug, and we caught a glimpse of the little girl on her back. "Is thatâ€¦" I breathed.

Rilebolt spat white fire at the rope that entangled the Zippleback twins' heads, revealing another familiar figure perched on her back. "Heather! And Arachne!" Astrid cried joyfully.

The two dragons landed simultaneously and sent all of the Outcasts running with their fires. Astrid ran over and hugged Stormfly, then Arachne as her sister got off. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you," Astrid told Heather as Arachne jumped behind her onto Rilebolt's back. "That's fine," she replied. "I wouldn't have believed me either."

Astrid smiled as she hopped onto Stormfly. "Now let's get your parents," I called, mounting Toothless. We all readied ourselves as we got into our battle positions.

But Heather jumped off of Rilebolt and left Arachne to it. "What are you doing?" Snaketail demanded. "Without a dragon you're defenseless!"

Heather smirked. "Not quite," she said mysteriously. She rapidly kicked off her boots and pulled off her vest. Everyone either gaped, gawked, gasped, or screamed in shock. Batwings' eye twitched.

Without her boots and vest, Heather appeared vastly different. From two large seams in the back of her shirt, a pair of gigantic wings spread, and her feet were adorned with ferocious, birdlike talons. She grinned, and two fangs flicked out from inside of her mouth.

Heather was a Siren.

Snotlout regained his composure first. "Let's go, guys! Move it or lose it!" he shouted, and Hookfang rose into the air. Everyone followed him into the air, flying circles around the shocked Outcasts. Astrid steered Stormfly over to Heather's parents, and the soldiers guarding them dove out of the way as they were snatched up in her talons. "Hang on!" Astrid cried as they soared into battle.

Heather and Batwings stayed on the ground a little while longer, looking at each other awkwardly. "I'm sorry," Heather said. "I'm sorry for deceiving you. I know that you probably really doubted

yourself afterâ€| you knowâ€|" She ducked her head in shame.

"Don't worry about it," Batwings said, causing her to look up again. "The past is behind us," he continued. "And now I know that I was right all along. I can trust you." Heather smiled at him.

The tender moment was interrupted by Snotlout. "Hey, lovebirds! Move or you'll be dead!" The two shook their heads as if to dispel their feelings and soared upward into our formation. But Heather went straight for Alvin, shrieking, "This is for my parents!" Before the Outcast leader could react, she had thrown herself at him and sank her fangs into his arm.

"ARGH!" he roared in rage. "That's the same damn arm! The pain just went away yesterday!" From Toothless' back, I could see Batwings smirking uncontrollably. As Heather climbed back into the sky to join us, I heard Alvin bellow at his soldiers to attack.

Barf and Belch picked up the Outcasts standing over the twins and threw them away like so much garbage. The twins snickered and climbed aboard. "OK, guys, just like we practiced!" I cried out.

Everyone flew into position, and almost immediately faced a hail of crossbow bolts and boulders. We dove and dodged each one, ready to end this.

"Ruff, Tuff, cover fire!" I cried, as they swooped down on Barf and Belch. "It's about time," Ruff said huffily. She pulled on Barf's horns, prompting the head to spray out her gas. They flew in front of the Outcast's catapults, hiding them from view with the thick green fog. "I love this part!" exclaimed Tuff, yanking on Belch's horns. He let loose with a spark that ignited the entire cloud, blowing four catapults to smithereens.

Batwings shapeshifted and went after the Outcasts that were rattled and not dead. Flinging one into his jaws and chewing loudly, he started as Heather joined in beside him, switching forms to match his. Her dragon form was only slightly smaller than his own, with purple-and-blue scales instead of green-and-blue ones. She grinned at him as the two eels flew down to pick off the rest of the dazed Outcasts.

However, two catapults still stood, and one of them flung the largest boulder yet straight at me and Toothless. We deftly dodged it, but it continued on a straight course right toward Fishlegs. "Look out!" I called back, just in time to see Meatlug swallow the rock. "Great job, girl!" Fishlegs said to the Gronckle. "Now use your lava blast!" Meatlug spat the glowing red rock right back out, demolishing the catapult. Outcasts ran frantically away from the burning mass of wood and metal.

The two Sirens continued to cause havoc amongst the Outcasts, spraying their invincible fires everywhere. "Yeah, go!" Astrid cheered from above her dragon, as Toothless blasted one of the crossbow wielders with his plasma. But then the remaining Outcasts turned their crossbows on her, whose arrows were narrowly avoided. "Snotlout!" she cried, and he flew in on Hookfang, who lit himself on command. "Light 'em up!" he shouted back to her as the burning dragon flew past the crossbow users' perches.

Stormfly flung a barrage of spines that shot right through Hookfang's flames, coming out blazing with heat. They slammed into the trees, causing the dead forest to catch fire and begin to burn. The Outcasts abandoned their posts and ran for it. "You feelin' the heat, boys? 'Cause I sure am!" Snotlout cried, overjoyed that he finally managed to get Hookfang to light up on his command.

"Great job, everyone!" I shouted. "Now let's get out of here!" I led the others as we wheeled in flight and began to flee. Snaketail and Horrorcow dropped the Outcast they were pummeling and followed, with Batwings and Heather close behind.

But just then, there was a distant yell that grew louder and louder. I looked back to see Savage flying right towards us! Not wasting time being shocked and puzzled, I cried out, prompting the others to steer clear of the danger. But Astrid got the message too late, and Savage crashed into her, causing them both to fall into the burning forest below.

Miraculously, neither were injured, and neither fell into the blaze. They both fell into an unscathed tree, but the branches they lay on quickly began to snap. Savage fell first, then Astrid fell as well.

I turned back, steering Toothless towards her. We had almost made it to the forest when Alvin came out of nowhere and grabbed Astrid. Seeing us coming in from the sky, he bolted. Narrowing my eyes, I increased our speed, rapidly gaining ground on the fleeing Outcast leader.

Toothless fired several plasma blasts without my prompting. But Alvin was too quick, and they all missed. The Night Fury fired again, several times, but to no avail. _What's wrong?_ I thought desperately. _Night Furies don't miss!_ It was only then that I realized that all of Toothless' previous targets "that is, catapult towers and the Red Death" were either unmoving or too big to miss. And Alvin was just the right size, albeit barely, to not get hit.

He stopped running when he reached the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea. I landed, watching as he held Astrid over the cliff. "Surrender!" he yelled. "Or I'll" well, you know the rest." He chuckled evilly.

I glared at him. "Toothless, you know what to do," I said, and the he reared up on his hind legs, a shriek building up in his throat as he readied a blast.

But Astrid, apparently, had other ideas. "Hiccup, no!" she cried. "Don't shoot!" I nodded to Toothless, who sat back down and swallowed the blast back down. A second later, a huge dragon jumped over the cliff and slammed into Alvin, throwing him to the ground. It was a Blundertail, and a massive one at that.

"Who is that?" I asked Astrid, awed that the beast had saved her like that "presumably by crawling up the cliffside. "Just a new friend I made," Astrid replied, grabbing the Book of Dragons that Alvin had dropped.

With some help from our friends, we were able to escape with the

flightless Blundertail. Alvin and Savage were left behind with nothing, and I knew that we could forget about them for now.

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****Docks****

I had known that this day would come eventually. Gobber had graciously prepared a boat for Heather and her parents, allowing them to sail back to Siren Island safely. All my friends were there to say goodbye to our newest friend.

Except Batwings. I had no idea where he had gone off to.

"Heather, how in Odin's name isâ€¦ thisâ€¦ possible?" Fishlegs asked incredulously, pointing to her newly revealed dragon characteristics. "You just gestured to all of me," she said with a smile. _So that's what it's like,_ I said to myself.

"My parents might be human, but they're not really my parents," she explained. "They found my egg before I was born and took me in. They were the first Peaceables to raise a dragon as their own. When the Outcasts raided our island, I kept my true nature hidden from them." She looked down at her hands and their sharp fingernails. "I had to de-claw myself, which was painful, but they'll grow back."

Astrid had a look of dawning comprehension on her face. "So my armâ€¦" she started to say. "Yes," confirmed Heather. "Siren venom." She showed off her fangs briefly before flicking them back.

"I can't thank you all enough," she suddenly said. "Especially you, Astrid. You put your life on the line for us." She just crossed her arms and replied, "It was nothing" â€" she was then struck speechless as Heather came forth and hugged her tightly.

When she let go, she turned to me and Toothless. "I'll miss you too," she said, patting Toothless on the nose. "Both of you." I smiled and spread my arms. "Who knows, maybe we'll see each other again sometime."

Heather smiled sincerely. "Maybe," she replied cryptically. "Justâ€¦" I began. "If you ever need help, you just have to ask us." She smiled, then ran down the dock and jumped into the boat beside her adopted parents.

Everyone waved as the boat moved out into the open water, and the trio waved back. "Write me!" called Snotlout. Even from this distance, we could see her smirk and shake her head no.

Astrid suddenly came forward and kissed me on the cheek. "That's for trying to save me," she said. "What, no punch?" I asked sarcastically, and she grinned and punched me on the shoulder. "And that was because you asked," she replied with an equal amount of sarcasm.

We left the docks in single file, walking up the stairs to the main part of the village. But for some odd reason, I turned to look back at the ocean. The boat was still visible in the distance. And then I realized that there was a winged figure silhouetted against the

setting sun, staring off into the distance. I looked at my friends, and they all nodded.

I walked up and put a hand on Batwings' shoulder. He didn't respond, just watching the boat shrink farther and farther as it moved closer to the horizon. His eyes were full of pain.

"Batwings," I said his name simply, and he at last turned around. He didn't speak. "I accused you of this before," said Astrid after a moment, "and I want to ask this time. 'You love her, don't you?' Batwings started, then dipped his head in a slight nod.

"Why don't you go after her?" Fishlegs put in. Batwings looked at him, more pain in his eyes. "You want me to go?" he rasped quietly. "To leave you guys? My friends?" His voice cracked.

I didn't take my hand away from his shoulder as I said, "You told me once that Sirens use their intuitions to find their mates. What is yours telling you?" Batwings looked forlornly back at the water as he murmured, "She's the one. I feel it."

Astrid punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Then go, go after her and tell her that yourself! You often say that Berk isn't your home anyway. Don't you want to see Siren Island again? Don't you want to— well, have a family?"

He paused, then nodded. "I'll miss you all," he said. "Come on, don't be a wimp!" Snotlout chastised him. "Be a man and buck up!" I grinned at Snotlout's bluntness, and I was delighted to see Batwings grin as well.

Just then, a hostile voice could be heard somewhere behind us. "I can't believe it! That infernal earth worm has been living under my house, Stoick! This is an outrage! What more reason do you need to get rid of these devils?!" Nightshade came flying over just then and hissed at Batwings urgently.

"Uh oh, looks like Mildew finally discovered he had a roommate," Tuff snickered. "You'd better run, Batwings," Ruff agreed, giggling.

The Siren smiled and mounted Nightshade. "You're the best," he told us. "I'll see you again if it's the last thing I do."

And then he whispered to Nightshade, and the pair flew off after the boat — and the young Siren it carried — into the sunset.

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****Sea Around Berk (Batwings' POV)****

Nightshade rapidly approached the boat, and I called out as we neared it. I could see the looks of confusion on the faces of the three of them as we drew nearer. It might have been my imagination, but Heather's eyes seemed to carry a trace of hope in them.

It wasn't the smoothest of landings when Nightshade touched down on the boat, and everyone had to gather their balance as it rocked. I climbed down from Nightshade and left the Whispering Death to get to know Heather's parents. As the three of them slowly bonded, I turned

to the girl.

"Heather," I gulped, then went on more strongly. "I wantâ€¦ I want more than anythingâ€¦ to come with you. I'm a Siren, and I feelâ€¦ I just feel that you're my soul-mate. You're the one I never even realized I had been looking for. Iâ€¦ I love you."

She looked at me, her eyes wide. Her pretty face slowly spread into a smile as she leapt forward and hugged me around the neck. I closed my eyes, wrapping my arms around her and hooking my wing claws around hers.

"I never knew it," she said into my neck, "but now I realize that I indeed feel the same way about you. I have a good feeling about you, Batwings." Heather looked back up at me and leaned in closer.

She finished her statement in a hushed whisper. "I love you too," she breathed.

And then her lips made contact with mine, and I felt happier than I ever had in my life.

I had flown away from my friendsâ€¦ only to find that a happy future with the one I truly loved lay ahead.

Heather pushed closer to me, and I gradually enveloped her in my wings. _I love you, Heather, _I thought.

-.---.--.

Ever since dragons showed up here on Berk, we've learned to expect the unexpected. But every once in a while, something or someone comes along and surprises us. And when that happens, you kind of hate to see them go.

Batwings and Heather both surprised us in their own ways.

And they are definitely no exceptions.

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****Just give me a minute to get my hankieâ€¦ *blows nose****

****Yep, I decided to take pity on Batwing's bleeding heart in this chapter. I had that glorious inspiration a few weeks ago and decided to take advantage of it.****

****The original pairing was going to be Batwings-Ruffnut â€" my idea was that the Siren would comfort her after losing Hiccup to Astrid. But I seriously could not resist this temptation.****

****OK, for those of you who guessed the correct answers to my two earlier questions â€" no one gets the cookie (damn it), Ferdoos gets the pie, and I apologize, but the cake was a lie XD****

****Tuffnut: "That rhymes!"****

****R+R, and see you soon for the next episode!****

****P.S. This is the longest chapter of "Legends are Born" so far!**

Chapters 13 and 21 come in close behind at just a few words shorter.**

36. How to Pick Your Dragon

****Bet you didn't see this one coming, readers!****

****I hope you realized that I never actually intended to write this episode (or "Portrait of Hiccup and Batwings"). I might as well just write about the whole damn series.****

****Naw, just kidding. I've already made up my mind to omit several episodes from this fanfic.****

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Here on Berk, we've always done things one way â€" the Viking way. Since dragons came, the Viking way has become, wellâ€" the hard way.

Unfortunately, some people, like my father, still refuse to change.

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****Hiccup's House (Hiccup's POV)****

I looked up from my sketchbook in response to a piercingly loud roar just outside. I walked past Toothless' bed, where the Night Fury was napping peacefully, and looked out of the window. I saw my dad and the Thunderdrum, Thornado, soaring off toward the Berk Dragon Academy.

The sight brought a smile to my face. Stoick was flying off to help with the setting up of the annual Thorfest games, a celebration in honor of our god Thor during that one time of year when there was no snow present on Berk. And this year, we were finally going to be doing it with our dragon companions.

I watched Stoick and Thornado fly off into the distance, still smiling. It hadn't been that long ago since my father had found that dragon stealing fish and destroying boats in order to feed its injured mate. Now the two of them were partners, just like me and Toothless or Astrid and Stormfly.

I walked back to my desk and let the memories come back to meâ€"

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****Docks, a Few Months Ago****

Gobber and I watched from the sidelines as a team of Vikings led by Stoick pulled a damaged Viking ship into the harbor. Littering the deck were shards of wood, scraps of fabric, and half-eaten fish. It didn't take a genius to figure out what had caused the destruction.

"Its tha' rogue dragon again," Gobber muttered. "That's the second

boat this week he's destroyed." Stoick replied in frustration, "And we've lost another catch. We might have been able to save it if we had gotten there sooner."

Toothless and I shared a sad look. Indeed, if my dad had listened to me earlier and found a dragon to ride, things would be much easier for him. But he was still stubbornly set in his old Viking ways.

"I know how you could have gotten there sooner," I piped up, causing the two adults to turn around and look at me. "Here we go again," Stoick muttered exasperatedly. I forged on, following him toward the boat. "If you had a dragon, you could have gotten there in five minutes instead of two hours â€" and you might have even been able to chase that rogue dragon away for good."

Stoick threw a stray piece of driftwood aside and told me heatedly, "As the chief of Berk, I do things the Viking way. Not the dragon way." I wasn't discouraged in the least as I smugly responded, "Well, the 'Viking way' is costing us a lot of fish, and almost as many boats." My dad had a pained expression on his face â€" he knew I was right but didn't want to admit it.

"The boy's right, Stoick," Gobber joined in helpfully. "If yeh were on a dragon, yeh could protect this island from a lotta things. Even Alvin." Stoick arched a skeptical eyebrow and considered.

"Right!" I jumped in, seeing my opportunity. "Youâ€| you could use a dragon to"- "You're right, Gobber," Stoick interrupted me without even looking my way. "Alvin knows we have dragons now. He'll be back."

Gobber patted Stoick's arm and said gently, "Yeh saw what those dragons did â€" they had Alvin on the run. Imagine if you were the one commandin' them." Stoick looked genuinely curious. "I'm listening," he said, and I muttered, "But clearly not to meâ€|" Toothless gurgled and nudged my hand, sensing my irritation.

"I can see it now," Gobber said, sweeping an arm in front of him. "A proud chief, rulin' his domain aboard a fearsome, fire-breathin' reptile. It gives me goosebumps just thinkin' about it."

Stoick turned to me. "Gobber's right about that," he said. "I need to learn to fly. When do we start the lessons." I rolled my eyes and asked in a voice heavy with sarcasm, "I don't know. Shouldn't we ask Gobber?"

Not getting my sarcasm, the blacksmith suggested, "Eh, I don't really have a preference. But sooner is always better, doncha think?"

I facepalmed as my dad nodded agreement.

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****Arena****

My dad and I were standing on the cliff near the Academy. I was beside Toothless, and Stoick was facing Batwings. Yes, that's right â€" I had managed to convince the Siren to be Stoick the Vast's mount. Not only was his pride hurt, but he had also muttered, "At least I'll be getting a good workoutâ€| and maybe a broken spineâ€|"

I had told him he had nothing to worry about, and he reluctantly agreed.

Now, he "stood" in his dragon form, facing my dad calmly. "Now remember," Stoick said to the Siren. "It's me that's going to be controlling you." Batwings' only response was a snarl and an angry twitch of his tail.

I hastily intervened before his temper could deteriorate any further. "Dad," I said hesitantly. "Before you get on a dragon, you have to show him that he can trust you." He put his hands on his hips and told me, "He already trusts me. I'm his chief!"

Batwings' snarl deepened and a lick of flame curled from his jaws. "Maybe," I said wearily, "but it still looks like he's considering throwing you off his back and into the ocean first chance he gets. It's very simple, just give me your hand."

Stoick rolled his eyes and sighed. "I didn't come here to hold hands, Hiccup," he said, equally wearily. I ignored that and took his hand, holding it in front of Batwings' snout. "Come on, bud," I told him. The Siren eyed the hand for a second or two, as if wondering whether or not to bite it off, before he sighed and pushed his head against Stoick's hand.

"You feel that?" I asked my dad. He didn't reply for a minute before he drew his hand back and rubbed his fingers. "Yep, still smooth and slimy," he muttered with a bit of disgust.

"That's not what I meant," I said flatly as Batwings raised an eyebrow at me. So, do you still think this is going to work out? he seemed to be asking.

"Can I get on him now?" Stoick asked impatiently, and I gave in. He got on Batwings, prompting a squawk from the Siren as he was literally thrown off by my dad's weight. He picked himself up off the ground with difficulty, growling to himself.

I got on Toothless and advised, "Just give him a little nudge, that'll get him to" â€" Stoick kicked Batwings' side with his heels. The Siren shot off like a missile, much to my dad's terrified dismay. I was off after them as Stoick and his dragon mount looped crazily through the sky. "I said nudge!" I yelled over the wind. "That was my nudge!" he shot back.

Our flight leveled out somewhat, and I was able to give my dad more advice. "Riding is simple," I told him. "Just steer him in the direction you want to do, and remember, the tail and wings control everything."

He snorted as Batwings picked up speed, "I know that." I retorted, "Then why are you heading for that rock?" I asked, pointing ahead and already steering Toothless in the opposite direction. "Because you're distracting me!" he yelled back, and he pulled on Batwings' head.

The Siren rose upwards into the air just as he was about to hit the rock. "Left!" I cried as they headed for another rock spire. Stoick send Batwings into a spin â€" in the wrong direction to boot. "The other left!" I shouted again. "Dragon's fault!" he said dismissively,

and then steered away as Batwings glanced off another rock.

"Are you going to blame that on him too?" I asked sarcastically. "Yep," Stoick said, irritated. Then I was forced to follow as Batwings went into an uncontrolled dive towards the water.

"Slow down!" I shrieked. "I'm trying!" Stoick bellowed back. He yanked hard on Batwings' head, and the Siren leveled out at the last minute, sending up a spray of seawater. "See?" Stoick glanced over at me smugly. "No, actually, I had my eyes closed because I didn't want to see you smashed flat," I replied.

I spoke too soon. My father didn't know how to slow down, and he steered Batwings in for a landing on Thor's Beach. "You're coming in too hard, Dad!" I yelled.

But it was no use when they were over the sandy ground, Stoick pulled up. Batwings, not having any legs, attempted a somewhat decent landing, but it was impossible at the speed at which they were going. Stoick was flung off of his back as the Siren crashed into the ground with a screech, sliding a fair distance and then grinding to a painful halt.

I landed much more gracefully on Toothless. Batwings shapeshifted and staggered over to me, dropping to the earth by my feet. "Next time you ask me a favor," he grunted, "I'll slap you in the face." I winced, not from the threat but because I probably deserved it.

"Where are you going, Dad?" I called after him. "I'm done with this," he replied. "I have a village to take care of." I sighed to myself. _That could have gone better._

But then he turned to me and said bluntly, "I'll need a ride home."

I nodded and mounted Toothless. Batwings looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to perhaps pat the spot behind me on Toothless' saddle or gesture to it in some other way.

When I didn't, he groaned.

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****Hiccup's House****

Well, all I had to say for myself was that I'm opportunistic. I told my dad to sit on Batwings' back as a passenger and sit back while we took 'the scenic route' back home. I used the opportunity to explain to him how much easier his job would be if he had a dragon of his own.

And I actually managed to convince him.

On the way back, we caught Ruff and Tuff yak-tipping again. Not only that, but we also chased away some wild boars that were ravaging Mildew's cabbages. Stoick was very impressed at, indeed, how easy being the chief was when you were flying around on a dragon.

And if that wasn't enough, I also showed him what I had shown Astrid

almost a year ago â€" a sunset view of Berk from above. If that hadn't convinced him of the advantages of owning a dragon, then I don't know what would.

I woke up that morning to find Toothless and Batwings both gone. "Toothless?" I called uncertainly, walking down the stairs. "Toothless!" Again, no answer. The house was empty.

I walked outside to find the Night Fury in front of the house, staring at something in the sky. "There you are, buddy," I said in relief, coming up to scratch his chin. "What are you looking at?"

The answer came from an unexpected source. A screech rang out into the morning air, and a gleaming green-and-blue serpent came crashing down to the ground from the sky. Stoick climbed off of his back and made a satisfied noise.

"Dad, what are you doing?" I asked as Batwings coiled up and then stretched himself out again. He coiled up one last time and stayed there with a grunt. "Kickin' butt and takin' names, that's what!" my dad answered cheerfully.

"On Batwings?" I asked. "We've been all over the island!" Stoick exclaimed as Batwings shifted uncomfortably to a new position. "Chiefing has never been so easy! Just came back to grab my hatchet. We're helping the Jorgensons clear out a fence." He walked past me into the house.

"Dad," I called half-heartedly after him. "You need to understand that Batwings" â€" but then Stoick brightened and turned away from the house. "Ah, you're right!" he interjected. "I don't need a hatchet! Batwings can just burn it down with his fire."

Stoick walked back over to Batwings and mounted him again. Slowly, the Siren reared his head up in preparation for takeoff. "Yeah, if you want the entire house to burn unstoppably," I muttered to myself just before Batwings lurched into the sky and out over the village.

"See ya, Batwings," I called. "I really hope."

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****Evening****

Astrid and I watched as Stoick completed yet another task from his new, if unwilling, dragon. They landed slightly more smoothly than all those other times, and Stoick looked very satisfied.

I had watched them fly all over the island, herding sheep and catching fish among other things. But now, Batwings looked as if he would drop dead at the weight of a feather on his back. "Same time tomorrow, Batwings," my dad laughed, patting him roughly on the head, not noticing the Siren's misery.

As soon as Stoick had left, Batwings shapeshifted and limped up the hill to stand beside us. He stretched himself out, and I heard his backbone crack audibly. "This is what you look like when you fly all

day carrying a four-hundred-pound man," he moaned, stretching again and causing another loud crack of bone.

"At least you two figured out how to get Stoick on a dragon," Astrid commented. Batwings grimaced at his next flex and whimpered, "Yeah, but can you please figure out how to get him _off_ one?!"

Astrid looked thoughtful. "How about the old 'honey and the hatchet'?" she suggested, and we gave her blank stares in response. She explained, "You know, you tell him something he really would like â€" that's the honey part â€" and then you hit him with something he doesn't like. That's the hatchet part." She walloped me in the shoulder to punctuate her point.

"Why does your advice always involve weapons?" I asked, only to have her grin at me. Batwings just muttered, "If it worksâ€"|" and then whimpered again as he stretched out his arms.

Indeed, I need to get my dad off of Batwings, I thought to myself, observing the distraught Siren as he stumbled his way up to bed in front of me. _Because I don't think he can take much more of this abuse._

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****Poor Batwings, huh? And just when you guys thought he was gone for good!****

****I just got an inspiration the other day â€" to write a humorous fanfic in which the gang undergoes a dare war, much like AnimationNut's fanfic. I thought it would be fun to get some of my own ridiculous ideas out there, and what's more, to include my own characters in the fun XD****

****Only question is â€" should I do it now, or later?****

****Anyway, review please, and I'll see you for the next chapter!****

37. Dragon and Viking

****Finishing the chapter, and then we can get back to the present day â€" where Batwings is ****_gone_****, remember? (Sorry, I had to rub that in.)****

****So, let's get on with it, and help Stoick pick out his new dragon!****

****Ferdoos: I kind of imagine that you'd have that reaction XD****

****But I've got enough Hiccstrid planned for this fanfic so that you'll eventually forgive me :)****

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****Hiccup's House, Morning****

Believe me, waking up to the sound of my dad calling out for Batwings

was something I never wanted do again. He stomped up to my room and yelled out for the dragon, causing me and Toothless to jolt awake.

"Where's Batwings?" he asked me when he saw that I was up. I quickly glanced up at the rafters and saw the Siren concealing himself as best as he could in them.

My mind drifted back to Astrid's advice and decided that it was worth a shot. "I don't know," I fibbed, "but youâ€¦ you look _great_, Dad! Wh-what did you â€¦ did you do something with your beard?"

He sighed and said, "You've given me the honey, now just hit me with the hatchet." I almost facepalmed, then thought better of it and got out of bed. "Look, Dad," I began. "You can't just keep taking Batwings. He's a part of the Academy, and he has a life of his own and a dragon of his own that needs to be taken care of." I tried to think of something else to say, but Stoick looked satisfied and disappointed ("_satisfointed_"?).

"Alright," he said. "That seems fair." I slumped in relief, and I could hear Batwings sigh quietly in much the same way.

"Soâ€¦ find me one!"

Those words caught me off guard. "Aâ€¦ sorry?" I asked for clarification.

"Find me a dragon as good as Batwings," Stoick repeated. "That shouldn't be so hard for the head of the Berk Dragon Academy." I bit my lip and thought about it. It didn't take much thinking to realize that it would probably be better for everyone if I did so.

I nodded, smiled, and led him out toward the arena.

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****Arena****

"The finest of dragon species on the island are all represented here at the Academy," I told my dad as my friends formed a ring around us, displaying their dragons. Stoick looked around at the variety of dragons, nodding to himself as he observed each one.

Snotlout stepped forward first. "But," he said, loud enough to get Stoick's attention. "The Monstrous Nightmare is the only dragon with enough brawn and prestige to suit men of our stature." He led my dad over to Hookfang and let him examine the Nightmare.

"Hop on board and feel the Monstrous Nightmare difference," Snotlout said in a voice that almost matched Trader Johann's when he was talking about his items for sale. "And on those cold winter nights, its entire body heats up. Let me warm him up for you."

Stoick sat on Hookfang's neck and gripped the horns, getting a feel for the riding position. Snotlout gently flicked Hookfang's horn, and the dragon glowed a bright red as he heated up.

There was the smell of something burning, and smoke rose from

Stoick's trousers. He yelled in pain and jumped into the trough of water we always had off to the side.

"Now, how about I put you down for one?" Snotlout added. "They come in an assortment of colors!" Stoick just growled and demanded to see the next dragon.

Snaketail showed him Horrorcow next. "The Grapple Grounder is the fastest dragon there is besides the Night Fury," she lectured. "It's hardy and loyal, and packs a mean punch with its fire and combat skills. Wouldn't you love a dragon that could fight alongside you at hand-to-hand combat?"

My father nodded thoughtfully and patted Horrorcow's head. Snaketail added, "In fact the only thing you have to watch out for is its" â€" Horrorcow suddenly turned around at something that caught her attention, and her tail tripped Stoick and sent him sprawling. "â€|short attention span," she finished with a grimace.

Stoick went over to examine Arachne's dragon. "The Skrill is dragon royalty," the girl said cheerfully. "It's really the only dragon suited for a chief. And when it's being threatened, its body will sizzle with electricity!" My dad walked up to Rilebolt and examined her, patting her head roughly.

A little too roughly. Rilebolt shrieked and stood on her hind legs, and a loud buzzing sound occurred. Stoick's hair and beard stood on end as the electricity shot through Rilebolt's scales. "Next!" he demanded, walking away from the Skrill.

Astrid and Stormfly were next. "Just because she's beautiful," Astrid said confidently, "people think she's not tough. But you should never underestimate meâ€| uh, herâ€| us." Stoick nodded agreement. "She is a beauty," he said, pressing his hand against her snout.

Stormfly was forced to duck her head from the blow and reflexively shot a plume of flame that burnt right through Stoick's shoulder pad. "Monstrous Nightmare's looking a little better, huh chief?" Snotlout asked smugly. "Next!" was all Stoick said.

The twins fought over who would get to speak first. Barf and Belch instinctively took their respective riders' sides, snapping at each other. Their fight only stopped when Barf gassed her brother, and he shot sparks to defend himself. The resultant explosion knocked the dragon out cold.

Then was Fishlegs. "What you're really looking for is loyalty â€" a dragon that'll be there for you no matter what," he said. "The last face you see at night, and the first face you see in the morning. Warming your bed when its cold outsideâ€| a sh-shoulder to cry on when the w-world has t-turned its b-back on youâ€| how could you not love a Gronckle?!" Fishlegs sobbed and hugged Meatlug.

"Sorry, Fishlegs," Stoick whispered. "But I'm looking for a dragon, not a mother." He turned to Batwings and Nightshade, eyeing the Whispering Death expectantly. She hissed and instantly burrowed through the floor, not wanting to go through what Batwings had gone through.

"And Toothless is the only Night Fury on Berk," I concluded. "Sorry

you didn't find what you were looking for" â€

Suddenly, Gobber ran in, all willy-nilly and panting for breath. "Stoick!" he called. "Another boat is bein' attacked! It's tha' rogue dragon again!"

My dad instantly took charge, walking over to Batwings and tapping his foot impatiently. The Siren glared heatedly before giving in and shapeshifting obligingly.

As Batwings lurched awkwardly into the air, Toothless and I followed them toward the sea.

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****Sea Around Berk****

We reached the scene of the crime within minutes. A dark shape was circling Bucket and Mulch's boat from under the water, and the pair clutched oars in their hands to defend themselves.

The dragon suddenly burst out from behind them, revealing itself to be a stingray-like beast with deep blue scales speckled with white. It roared, the force of the roar blowing the mast over and almost tipping the boat.

"I don't believe it," I whispered. "It's a Thunderdrum! They say it gets its power from Thor himself." The Thunderdrum roared one last time before flying high into the air to meet us.

"Fire a warning shot, let him know we mean business," Stoick ordered. Batwings shook his head and growled. "Toothless, plasma blast!" I cried, and the Night Fury fired a burst that went wide. The Thunderdrum dodged it and flew into the bright sun â€" three seconds later, as we shielded our eyes, it flew back out of the glare and right at us.

The sea dragon let out a whale-like roar and opened its huge, circular maw. Stoick faltered at the terrifying sight, and Batwings snarled at it before spitting a fire blast at it. The Thunderdrum avoided it and dove back into the water with a surprisingly small splash.

We all landed on the boat. "I think we scared him off," I said hesitantly. "Come on, lads!" Stoick told Mulch and Bucket. "We'll escort you back to shore. We'll have no more" â€" just then, a thin, whiplike tail shot out of the water, coiled itself around Stoick, and pulled him forcefully under the water.

I paled and ran to the side of the boat. "No more what?" Bucket called. "Um, Stoick can swim, right?" Mulch asked me.

But then, there was an enormous splash, and the Thunderdrum emerged with Stoick clutching its nose horn. They landed on the deck, making the boat rock wildly as they struggled. "He's a fighter!" Stoick yelled as he bashed the dragon in the nose with his fist.

It recovered rapidly, twisting around and tackling Stoick to the deck. "He's got spunk!" my dad yelled happily. He cast a fishing net around the Thunderdrum and wrestled him to the deck. "This is the

one, Hiccup! I found my dragon! Now all you have to do is train him for me."

Mulch and Bucket dropped their oars in shock. I gaped as the sea dragon ceased its struggles and slumped to the deck. _Wow,_ I thought. _But how are we supposed to train such a wild beast?_

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****Arena****

We ended up putting the Thunderdrum in one of the cages in the arena while Batwings looked after it. Gobber forged a wide iron muzzle to put around its mouth and finished it the following morning. He had walked into the cage and put the muzzle on as it was still asleep.

Now, Stoick, Batwings, and I all stood outside the cage while its eyes glowed an angry yellow from behind the bars. "Sorry about the muzzle, Dad," I said. Batwings shrugged and murmured, "He won't say anything about why he's messing with the fleet. But he must have a good reason. The only thing I learned was that his name's Thornado."

Stoick tapped a sizeable foot and demanded, "Then let's get me a saddle and onto his back. Time's a wasting." Thornado growled deeply from his prison and Batwings muttered bitterly, "We just have to find one in your size."

My father glared at him angrily. "What was that?" he asked, and Batwings ducked his head and muttered under his breath, not giving an answer.

"Look, Dad," I said, catching his attention. "You're going to have to approach him differently, especially a dragon like this. He's a wild dragon, and he's the most powerful I've ever seen."

Stoick replied stubbornly, "That's why I picked him. They say his roar gets its power from Thor himself â€" he's the god of thunder, you know." I rolled my eyes. "So I've heard," I said. "You have to let Thornado know you're a friend."

That, at least, got my father actually thinking. "A friend, huh?" he said. "Like me and Gobber?" I clicked my fingers and replied, "Yeah, perfect! What did you do when you two met?"

Stoick rushed forward and held me in a headlock. "That's my wife you're talking to, you one-legged lout!" he recited. I gasped for air and coughed a few times before choking, "Not exactly the approach I had in mind. What's really important is that you let Thornado know that he can trust you. You have to make eye contact," I emphasized, pointing to my own eyeballs to make my point.

"Uh-huh, sure," Stoick said impatiently, and I walked over to the lever next to the cage. With a grunt, I opened it, and Thornado sprang to his feet, taking a few steps back out into the light.

The dragon stopped when he was a few meters away from Stoick, and the two glared into each other's eyes. "Stay calm and be gentle," I

warned, holding my hands out to both my father and the dragon. "You'll know you've formed a bond when he bows his head to let you climb on his back," Batwings murmured.

Stoick held out his hand toward the dragon. Thornado eyed it and didn't move. I held my breath. _This might work,_ I thought. _This might actually work._

But my father was moving too quickly. Thornado suddenly snapped his jaws as best as he could with the muzzle on, and Stoick frantically pulled his hand back. After seeing it was indeed still there, he grunted and smashed the Thunderdrum back into the cage.

"Wait, wait, wh-what happened to trust?" I stammered, aghast. "Tell that to him!" Stoick argued angrily. "He's the one that tried to take off my hand!"

There was a tinny roar from inside the cage, and Thornado galloped out, flapping his wings in an attempt to escape. He had almost made it when Stoick grabbed his tail and pulled on it. "This is not bonding!" I protested, indeed almost scolded. "Nah, you have to show these beasts who's boss," he replied with effort.

He snapped Thornado's tail like a whip, flinging him to the ground. Quickly, Stoick jumped on the dazed dragon's back. "Look at that!" he said, satisfied. "I'm on his back. Any questions?"

Thornado collected his thoughts and jumped into the air to fly frantic circles around the arena. "Oh, too many to ask," I muttered as the Thunderdrum flew out of the open exit and into the blue yonder, Stoick's frustrated shouts ringing out long after the two had disappeared.

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****Gobber's Forge****

I sought out Gobber by instinct. In the good old days, Gobber had been my mentor and the father I technically never had. He was always willing to listen and gave me helpful advice â€" well, most of the time.

Now, I paced as he was digging around in the mouth of a Gronckle. "I tried talking to him, but he just wouldn't listen!" I exclaimed. "It's like I'm wasting my breath."

Gobber suddenly held up a hand and crowed, "I got it!" I sighed with satisfaction, "Finally, someone understands me."

The blacksmith pulled back out of the dragon's mouth and held up a bad tooth. "I meant this. Nasty. Now, what were ya sayin'?" he added conversationally.

I sighed again, this time with exasperation. "My father," I said wearily. "Right, Stoick," Gobber replied. "Lemme explain somethin' about fathers and sons. It's a father's job ta listen to their sons, withou' ever lettin' on that he's heard a word."

I raised an eyebrow. "Thank you for summing that up," I muttered â€" again, a throwback to the old days, when I'd often say that in

response to a piece of bad advice.

"Hiccup!" came the familiar voice, and out from the other side of the plaza came my dad, holding his back and limping slightly. He looked soaking wet and had several bruises. "Dad! What happened?" I asked, racing over.

"Ah, that beast threw me off and flew off to Thor knows where," he replied bitterly. "Well can you blame him?" I asked. "All you two did was fight!"

Stoick waved that off. "No, he loved it!" he laughed. "Apparently not," I argued.

"We can stand here debating, or we can go get my dragon back!" Stoick told me, marching off. Hanging my head, I slumped after him.

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****Sky Over Berk****

My friends had agreed to help my dad and I search for Thornado. Batwings reluctantly came along as Stoick's mount, and pretty much forcing Nightshade to stay behind again. The rest of the gang all sat comfortable on their own dragons.

As we raced over the village and towards the forested mountains, Stoick shouted instructions to everyone. "Alright, we have to fan out and cover every part of the island. Twins, you take the west side. Snotlout, to the north side!"

I groaned. "Can anyone even see me over here?" I called out sarcastically, not expecting an answer. "Come on, Fishlegs, we'll take the east side," Astrid shouted. "But its allergy season!" he protested, but went along anyway.

Toothless and I followed Stoick and Batwings. "Well," Stoick yelled over to me, "your friends are an odd bunch, but they sure know what they're doing on those dragons." I shrugged and replied, "Thanks, I think."

We flew for another half hour before I spoke up again. "You know," I said hesitantly, "when we find the dragon, you might want to consider approaching him a little differently. Obviously, he doesn't like being pushed around."

We suddenly caught a glimpse of something colored bright blue retreat into a cave in a clearing overlooking a cliff. "There he is!" Stoick exclaimed. "And once again, nothing gets through," I said to myself, following him down.

We landed in front of the cave, and Thornado came waddling out to meet us. He growled threateningly, and Toothless reared up and roared back. "Settle down, bud," I cautioned, and he went back onto all fours.

"Let me handle this," Stoick ordered, taking out a hammer. "This dragon's mine." I stepped forward to try and restrain him, but he marched forward anyway, the hammer raised near his head.

Thornado kept close to the cave entrance and didn't budge, flaring his wings as if to block the cave. Stoick looked fiercely into Thornado's eyes, and the dragon gave him its own sizzling stare. But then, a mournful cry echoed out from the cave, and our eyes both strayed to the darkness that Thornado was blocking.

Our eyes widened simultaneously as we noticed a purple Thunderdrum sprawled out on the cave floor with an enormous, bleeding tear in its wing. "There's another Thunderdrum in there," Stoick breathed, his grip on the hammer faltering. "She's hurt," I murmured, pointing to the wing.

"Wh-whyâ€¦ why, he's protecting his mate," Stoick stammered, something I've never seen him do before. Batwings snapped his claws. "That's why he's been taking all those fish!" he exclaimed.

Stoick turned to me and Batwings. "Go get the others," he commanded. "And tell Gobber to get ready." Instantly, I held up my hands and said, "I can't just leave you here!" Batwings nodded, clearly thinking, as I was, that nothing good would come of this.

But Stoick's gaze made us give in and fly off, leaving the Viking chief alone with the incensed, protective Thornado and his injured mate.

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****Several Minutes Later****

I definitely spoke for everyone when we flew in toward the clearing and saw Stoick just landing on the ground, on the back of Thornado. I was the first to land, and I got off Toothless. I blinked when I saw that Thornado's muzzle was off, and that the two looked completely comfortable.

"Whatâ€¦ happened?" I asked gingerly. Stoick chuckled and casually replied, "Battled a few boars, did some bonding." I looked around, and there were indeed several wild pig corpses lying around. "You?" I asked. "Of course," he chuckled again. "There's something you should know about training dragons. It's all about trust."

A hopeful smile appeared on my face. "So you actuallyâ€¦ heard that?" I asked, not daring to believe it. Stoick actually laughed this time. "Yes, I just said it. I listen."

I laughed along with him, then directed Astrid and Fishlegs toward the injured Thunderdrum. With Batwings' gentle urging, the dragon crawled weakly onto the long cloth they rested in front of it. When the Thunderdrum was securely on the blanket, Stormfly and Meatlug picked up the ends and slowly rose with their precious cargo.

We got back to the village at sunset and gently laid the female Thunderdrum in front of Gobber's forge. "Take good care of her," Batwings called. "She's a friend."

Gobber nodded and grinned, giving us the thumbs up as we all flew away on our dragons â€" Stoick and Thornado included.

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****Hiccup's House, Present Day****

I sighed to myself and sat up from my table. Toothless looked up and warbled hopefully, to which I replied with a chuckle. "Yes, we can go flying before bed," I assured him, leading him out of the house.

We took off, and saw that hours had passed since I had first started remembering that day. Already, Stoick had finished helping with the preparation of the Thorfest games and was riding off on Thornado for one last task before the day ended. I decided to follow him.

We caught up to him just as the ray-like dragon towed two boats into the open water. Thornado let the rope dangling from his claws drop and then flew off into the setting sun. My father grinned as we swooped low over the waves together, and we were soon joined by Thornado's mate, Coralwing.

I loved doing things with my father, just the two of us â€" woodworking, fishing, all that. But now I could do the thing that I already loved the most â€" flying on Toothless â€" with him as well, now that he had his own dragon companion.

Together, Thornado, Coralwing, and Toothless all flew off over the sparkling water together, each giving their own individual roars of freedom and triumph that reverberated off the water and rocks surrounding us.

The sound brought a delighted shiver up my spine as we left Berk temporarily behind us, laughing along with the dragons' cries.

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Well, Dad still does things the Viking way.

Fortunately, Toothless and I have shown him that the Viking way can also be the dragon way.

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****Just want to say that I love the remixed "Test Drive" music that plays at the end, but not as much as the remixed Red Death battle theme that I mentioned in an earlier chapter.****

****But, another episode done and over with! I'll be nice and give you the next one, if it isn't obvious enough â€" "Thawfest"! (Or as I refer to it, "Thorfest".)****

****As more and more dragons appear â€" the latest have been Spike, Sparrowfoot, and Coralwing â€" it's getting difficult to fit them all into this story. I'll do my best though, so expect to see more of those three in the future.****

****R+R and see you readers soon!****

****Yep :3** As you saw in the previous two chapters, I changed the name from Thawfest to Thorfest â€" just thought it would be a little more appropriate that way.******

****Anyway,** this chapter is short but sweet. We'll get to the more exciting stuff in the next chapter.******

****Soâ€|** let the games begin! XD******

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Every year on Berk, we come together to test our strength, endurance, and courage in the annual Thorfest games. For some of us, it'sâ€| not such a great time of year.

In fact, I've lost every single time to my cousin Snotlout.

But this year, all that could change. This year, I actually have a chance to win. Because for the first time ever, the Thorfest games will includeâ€|

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****Arena****

"Dragons!" Gobber announced. "They are now officially a part of Thorfest!" I felt an excited quiver run up my back as he announced that in his cheerful voice.

The changes the Academy had undergone as part of Thorfest were dramatic. The chain-link netting had been removed, and benches had been set up all along the rim. Banners and other decorations had been posted all around, especially at the entrance. And of course, us and our dragons were there.

The only ones missing were Snotlout, for some reason, and Batwings, who was probably chilling on Siren Island right about now. I smiled as I tried to imagine what the Siren and his girlfriend â€" sorry, mate â€" Heather would be doing at this time of the day. I almost chuckled at the thought of them sitting peacefully in front of a cozy fireplace, held in each others' arms and talking quietly, even lovingly, to each other.

I was snapped from my carefree thoughts by Gobber, who was going on to explain the events of the Thorfest games. "There'll be three additional events," he lectured. "The first is the flyin' shoot, which'll require yeh to fly straight and shoot straighter" â€" he was then forced to duck as Ruff and Tuff fired a shot from their Zippleback.

"Sorry!" Tuff called. "We're on the wrong heads." They swapped positions as Ruffnut exclaimed, "I knew something felt weird!" They shot another blast, which Gobber barely got out of the way of. "Ah, much better," Tuff sighed.

"Next is the freestyle," Gobber continued as if nothing had happened. "It's up to you to impress the judges with a trick of yer choice." Astrid chose that moment to fly in gentle circles on Stormfly, doing a bunch of cautious, experimental acrobatics. "Ah, a Nadder wing-walk. Impressive, Astrid," Gobber complimented.

"Meatlug and I were wondering if there were going to be any intellectual events," Fishlegs hazarded, and Gobber patted his arm. "I'll take tha' under advisement, Fishlegs," he said. "And let's not forget the hurdles! Yeh'll be asked ta" â€" a loud cheer rang out into the air, and we all looked up as Snotlout and Hookfang landed heavily on the floor.

"You know what I love the most about Thorfest?" he asked, glancing at us to see if we had any guesses. "The arrogant idiots swaggering around with all their previous awards?" Snaketail asked sarcastically, pointing at the twenty-odd Thorfest medallions hanging from Snotlout's neck.

He didn't get the sarcasm. "Nah, never seen one. Anyway, the part of Thorfest I love most is the winning! Wanna touch one of my medals, just to see what it feels like to be a winner?" he bragged, holding out a medal. "I think I'll pass," I muttered. Everyone else didn't say anything.

Snotlout put the medal back and continued pridefully, "My family has never lost a Thorfest game. Ever." Astrid sighed, "Here we goâ€|"

The large boy crossed his arms and went on, "Dragons or no dragons, I'm going to do what I do every year â€" bring glory to my clan. And you, Useless, will do what you do â€" embarrass yours."

He jumped on Hookfang, and by now everyone was looking at him with annoyance and disgust. "I will crush you all!" he cried just before Hookfang took off without him being ready, and he ended up dangling upside down from the Nightmare's neck as he flew off.

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****Gobber's Forge****

Toothless and I were in Gobber's forge that evening. He was resting and I was busy drawing some possible designs on a sheet of parchment. I thought I'd need a new, updated saddle and tail fin for him in order to maximize our speed â€" that would help indefinitely in the Thorfest games.

"OK, this should work," I muttered to myself, taking a long coil of measuring tape off the desk. That was my own invention, in order to measure things more accurately. So instead of getting a rough measurement of what I needed, I could be a lot more precise.

I took the tape off of the desk and used it to start measuring Toothless. I was about halfway done when I heard a cough. I looked around to see Stoick, Astrid, and Arachne standing there watching.

"What are you two working on?" the little girl asked curiously. "Just some ideas for Thorfest," I replied casually, turning back to the tired Night Fury. "Oh, right," she said, then fell silent to watch me work with the others.

"Did you need anything?" I asked a moment later. Stoick stepped

forward and replied, "Well, I just wanted to say that on that dragon, you could actuallyâ€¦| you knowâ€¦| beat your cousin."

I chuckled. "When you put it like that, it has a nice ring," I said, grinning. We stared at each other for a few more second before my dad clapped his hands together and said, "OK then! Eh, I'll let you get back toâ€¦| well, whatever it isâ€¦| you two do." He clapped me on the back and walked out of the forge.

The two girls stayed behind to watch me work. "Want to help?" I asked. "Naw, just came to say goodnight," Arachne yawned. "Come on, big sister, let's get some sleep before tomorrow." She then walked off and left Astrid and I alone.

There was a long, awkward silence. "You really think you can beat Snotlout?" Astrid finally asked. "With Toothless? We can beat anyone!" I said loyally, and Toothless rumbled his agreement.

Astrid just nodded and said nothing. "You alright?" I asked hesitantly. "Everything's fine," she said with a shrug. "Just a little upset knowing that it'll just be another Thorfest game I lost starting tomorrow."

I punched her on the shoulder, trying to cheer her up. She understood the meaning behind the punch and smiled. "See you tomorrow then," she told me, and I held out my arms. She hugged me and we kissed tenderly for a few seconds.

We broke apart at last and she dashed off with a wave. I smiled and shook my head at Toothless. He grinned and warbled back at me merrily. I knew he felt as confident as I did for the start of the Thorfest celebration.

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****Arena, Two Days Later****

Our part of the Thorfest games didn't actually start until today. All of the adults got to go yesterday, and their feats were impressive as usual. Take Gobber lugging five sheep at once despite his peg leg and his interchangeable hand for instance, or my father throwing an axe at the target exactly where he had hit it before, shattering the blade already there. Stoick won the adult portion of Thorfest easily.

But now was our turn to shine â€" well, more like Snotlout's turn. I hated to admit it, but none of us stood a chance against him. Astrid would have easily beaten him if it weren't for the others getting in her way. That was actually the truth, not just her being competitive as usual. The rest of us were as clumsy as a three-legged yak in a windstorm.

"Let the second day of the Thorfest games begin!" cried Stoick, throwing out his arms as he stood on the wooden stage on which the Thorfest winners were displayed. We all stood below him, cracking our knuckles, waving to the cheering crowd, or just wishing the day would come to an end quicker.

On the side wall, crude pictures of our faces were painted â€" whatever points we got would be painted as blue lines next to

them.

The first event started immediately after Stoick's announcement. Mulch and Bucket were the announcers. "The contestants are now lining up for the sheep lug!" Mulch yelled out to the crowd. "It's a good day for luggin' sheep, Mulch," Bucket added. Mulch agreed, "_Everyday's_ a good day for lugging sheep!"

Gobber placed a large sheep on each of our backs. I was proud to say that I could at least lift the sheep. I grabbed onto its skinny legs and held tightly as we stepped up into running position. "On yer mark!" called Mulch. "Get set!" He then whacked Bucket's bucket with his hook, producing an audible ring that signaled the start of the event.

We all took off at a run, with Snotlout quickly taking the lead. Astrid and I were close in second. The twins quickly abandoned the race when Tuff bumped into his sister, which caused her to retaliate. Soon they were brawling off to the side as Fishlegs and Snaketail collapsed to their knees near them.

In front of me, Astrid and Snotlout were neck and neck, and I was right behind them. But suddenly, I stumbled and careened into Astrid's back, causing her to fall. Snotlout breezed past her and broke the rope at the finish line. I tried to regain my balance, but fell down and was crushed under my sheep.

"And the first point of the Thorfest games goes to Snotlout!" announced Mulch. Snotlout whooped and threw his sheep down in celebration, knocking it out. "Snotlout, Snotlout, oi oi oi!" he cheered, and Spitelout parroted him from the audience.

I struggled to get up after my sheep got off of me. Snaketail helped me up, for which I thanked her. We then filed out of the arena so the adults could set up the next event.

Half an hour later, we were all perched on a giant log held up by two supports. "Next is the traditional log roll event!" Mulch shouted into his horn. "Enjoy your faceplant," Snotlout snickered as the signal to start was given. We all began running on the log, causing it to spin rapidly.

Things spun out of control just as quickly. Ruff and Tuff tripped and ended up rolling with the log, and eventually their own momentum launched them at the far wall. Snaketail lost her balance and dropped to the ground lightly. Fishlegs' arm whacked Astrid in the face and caused her to tumble, with him soon following.

I was the only one left, but eventually my prosthetic caught in a groove on the log, and I was literally flung to the ground. Above me, Snotlout just kept running, holding his arms in the air triumphantly.

"And another point goes to Snotlout!" cheered Mulch as Bucket painted another long blue line next to Snotlout's portrait. I grunted as Toothless ran over from the sidelines and picked me up by the back of the neck. "Thank you!" Toothless, I muttered, rubbing my sore back.

The next event started another half hour later. Targets were set up

on the far side of the arena, and we were all supplied with axes to throw at them. "Next is the axe toss!" Mulch helpfully announced. "In this event, accuracy is everything!"

We didn't need telling twice. Snotlout threw his axe, but Fishlegs' poor throw caused the two weapons to clatter to the ground. I tossed mine straight and true, but despite my accuracy, there wasn't enough strength in the throw. The axe buried itself in the ground just below the target.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut both missed spectacularly, and Snaketail's axe was caught effortlessly by Stoick up above. Astrid's, however, flew magnificently through the air and connected with the center of her target. "Bulls-eye!" Mulch cried, and the crowd cheered. Snotlout looked stricken. Arachne could be heard cheering the loudest as she clapped wildly for her older sister.

The last three events went by quickly, and were each won by someone different — none of them me. I lost miserably in the arm-wrestling contest, the swimming race, and the archery event. Astrid won the latter with her spectacular aim with her arrows. Tuffnut won the swimming race by a hair, and Snotlout crushed us all in arm-wrestling.

Spitelout gave a mighty whoop as my cousin threw my arm to the side, and I followed it onto the hard ground. "Why don't ya give us the medal now, Stoick?" he taunted. "You'll save your boy the embarrassment!"

Stoick's gaze was like metal as I picked myself up painfully. "Why don't you sit back down, _Spitelout_," he retorted fiercely. Gobber muttered something as Snotlout's dad sat down reluctantly.

At the end of the day, I stared at the scoreboard. Snotlout was obviously in the lead with three points, Astrid followed with two, and Tuffnut only had one. No one else had managed to score any points. "Well, dead last again," I muttered to myself.

Loud footsteps announced Snotlout's sudden appearance. "Wow, I have the most points and the best looking picture?" he exclaimed. My temper suddenly flared up and I snapped back, "Yeah, well have your fun now! Tomorrow, everything will change. Right, bud?" I added, walking up to Toothless. He gurgled in agreement.

But Snotlout could never let anyone have the last word. "I can't wait!" he replied. "Because Hookfang and I — it's like boy and dragon have become one! We're like a bragon. Or a droy." He mounted Hookfang and the Nightmare took off into the sunset. "Or a Snotfang!" he yelled back.

"Yeah?" I called to the rapidly shrinking pair. "Well tomorrow you'll have to answer to — Hic-tooth!" I mentally facepalmed for not thinking up a better comeback.

"Hic-tooth?" Astrid's voice came, asking me skeptically. I glanced at her and muttered a reply. "Yeah, it isn't my snappiest comeback, but —"

She raised her eyebrows but didn't push further. "Why are you letting yourself be caught up in this?" she asked instead. I sighed and

answered, "Becauseâ€| for the first time ever, I have a chance to beat Snotlout. To quiet him down!" Astrid looked at me, her gaze unreadable, when Snotlout and Hookfang suddenly swooped down over the arena again and yelled, "Snotlout, Snotlout, oi oi oi!"

She glanced again at me. "Good point," she finally admitted. "I have to say, it would be nice to see someone else with a Thorfest medal." She quickly hugged me in farewell, which I returned whole-heartedly. "Good luck tomorrow," she said in my ear, quietly.

"Thanks," I murmured back. She broke from our embrace and quickly mounted Stormfly, with the Nadder rising into the air and almost immediately flying out of sight.

I looked balefully at the scoreboard, as if my gaze would cause Snotlout's portrait to burst into flames. "You've spiked your last sheep, 'Snotfang'â€|" I muttered determinedly, slapping my fist into my palm. "Tomorrowâ€| tomorrow's a new day."

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****Seriously, there is no way that there are only three games in Thorfest, and there is also no way that the adults don't participate. Not to mention that Snotlout is suddenly much better at all these Viking-like recreational activities than Astrid. Why? Justâ€| why?***

****So we'll cover the dragon games in the next chapter, clear? See ya'll then!***

39. Winner or Loser?

****Sorry for the slight hiatus, readers. The unthinkable has happened â€" I'm actually losing interest in "Legends are Born", and regaining interest in a fanfic I've started writing a while ago â€" a post-apocalyptic version of Pokemon Black/White.***

****I'm going keep trying to write these chapters though, because I do not want "Legends are Born" to end up like "Wrath of the Caliotheo King".***

****On a slightly cheerier note, I just realized I could have cut the last chapter off at a later point. Now that I've written this, Hiccup's first win seems to be just as good of a cliffhanger, if you get what I'm saying.***

****Matt: You seriously think I'm abandoning the best OC I've ever made, not to mention the cutest couple I've ever made? Think again.***

****They'll be backâ€|***

****He's also appearing in every one of the HTTYD fanfics I have planned for the future.***

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****Morning***

As I had promised myself yesterday â€" today was a new day. Today marked the start of the Thorfest dragon games, as well as the start of my big chance to finally beat Snotlout and win Thorfest. But now, all of my friends gathered in the arena, alongside their dragons. Everyone looked equally as eager to compete, but no one was more determined than Toothless and I. The Night Fury seemed to be looking forward to beating Hookfang just as much as I was looking forward to besting Snotlout.

"Welcome today to the third day of the Thorfest games! Let the dragon events begin!" Mulch shouted in a rousing voice. He was greeted by enthusiastic cheers from the other adults. "It's a good day for luggin' sheep, Mulch," Bucket put in helpfully, and Mulch gave him an encouraging nod before continuing with his commentary.

"First and foremost, we have the hurdles!" he announced, gesturing to the series of logs that were lined up in the arena, through the exit, and just outside. We all lined up, ready to take our turns. "Hurdles, shmurdles," Snotlout said cockily. "I could make it over those things in my sleep." Snaketail quickly corrected him, "You don't go over them, you go under them."

Snotlout glared at her for a few seconds before facing the front and muttering, "Duh, I knew that."

Mulch clanged his hook against Bucket's head. "And first up is Fishlegs!" he called, and Fishlegs and Meatlug took off at a confident buzz. They approached the first hurdle â€" and ended up stuck underneath it. "Uh, guys, a little help over here!" he groaned, and then said to Meatlug, "Don't worry, girl, this just isn't our event."

Next were the twins. They made it through the first few hurdles with some ease, but then they mixed up. The Zippleback ended up with the fourth hurdle caught between their necks, and the sudden halt caused the twins to fly off and into the audience.

Snaketail was after them. They made it almost to the end, when a seabird flew by and caught Horrorcow's attention. The Grapple Grounder veered sharply up in pursuit of the bird, and ended up missing the last couple of hurdles.

Then was Astrid. She and Stormfly made their way magnificently through each of the hurdles, but just as they were approaching the end, Astrid bumped her head on one of the logs.

"Where's your book, Hiccup? You might want to take notes!" Snotlout taunted me as he and Hookfang got ready for their turn. The Nightmare jumped forward and skimmed the ground, gliding under the first hurdles. Things started going wrong almost from the start â€" Snotlout continuously banged his head on each and every one of the hurdles.

When they were finished with their turn, I felt Toothless tense up in anticipation. "Let's show them how it's done, bud," I murmured, and the Night Fury instantly shot forward. At the last instant, I clicked the stirrup and Toothless flipped upside down. We streaked under each of the hurdles in this position, without missing a single one.

"And Hiccup makes a perfect run!" Mulch announced, and Bucket painted

a long blue line next to my picture on the scoreboard. Toothless landed on the other side of the line of hurdles and I let out an overexcited laugh. "Did you hear what he said?" I asked enthusiastically. "Perfect! I believe that those are my first Thorfest points, ever! I just realized somethingâ€¦ I like beating Snotlout. I feel taller, am I taller? Never mind, don't answer that."

I was so giddy that I didn't hear the whispered conversation that Fishlegs and Astrid were having just behind me. "Is Hiccupâ€¦ gloating?" Fishlegs asked uncertainly. "I'm not exactly sure," Astrid answered. "I've never actually heard him gloat before."

Just then, Hookfang swooped in next to me, cutting off my rant. "Don't get too excited," Snotlout warned menacingly, and held up a finger. "You know what this is? The number of wins I need to end this thing. And you know what this is?" he added, holding up a second finger. "The number of chances I have."

I held up my own hand, meeting my forefinger and thumb together, and shot back, "Well you know what this is? The size of your brain. No wait," I corrected myself, shrinking the circle I had made with my fingers. "Yes, that's much better."

Snotlout glared heatedly at me. "Like you've ever seen my brain," he muttered. "Like I ever want to," I retorted smugly. He didn't say anything, just flew off on Hookfang.

I noticed Astrid giving me a questioning stare. "What? He started it," I protested. "When we were fiveâ€¦" We all flew away to let the adults clear the arena for the next event.

The next event was ready not too long after. Mulch announced the start as usual; "Next we have the freestyle event! Contestants and their dragons will show off their style and abilities, in order to impress the three judges!" He pointed with his hook over to the judges' table, and the three Vikings waved to the crowd briefly before sitting back down.

Ruff and Tuff were up first this time. "Check this one out!" Ruff called, standing on top of her brother's shoulders while he in turn had a foot on each of Barf and Belch's necks. "We call it the iron split!" Tuff said, just before the Zippleback's heads separated slightly. When that happened, he was pretty much forced to split, and there was an immense ripping sound. "Ouch," he muttered.

The judges looked bored as they wrote out the twins' scores. They got a measly two out of nine.

Next was Fishlegs and Meatlug. "We like to call this next feat of daring the extreme butterfly!" Fishlegs announced, flying in fast and ever-tightening circles around the arena. But soon, Meatlug's maneuverability wasn't able to keep up with the speed of her increasingly sharp turns, and they spun uncontrollably off into a corner.

The judges gave him a four out of nine. "It's OK, girl," Fishlegs said quietly to a dizzy Meatlug. "This isn't our event either."

Then was Snaketail, who performed the same trick as that one day of

fun in the rocky maze all that time ago â€" Horrorcow curled her sinuous body into a loop and twirled through the air while Snaketail held on. The crowd muttered in awe as the Grounder increased her speed, but Snaketail lost her grip and was flung off into the crowd. She got a slightly better score of six out of nine.

Astrid was next in line, impressing the crowd with a series of acrobatics from Stormfly's back. As they oohed and aahed, Fishlegs muttered next to me, "How does she make it look so easy?" Tuff turned to his sister, who had a slightly jealous look on her face. "How come you can't do that?" he asked, and the reply he got was a vicious slap in the face.

Meanwhile, Astrid got a great score of seven out of nine. When she and her dragon filed out of the arena, Toothless and I went next. We shot up into the sky and then performed a power dive at a sharp descending angle. As we neared a nearby rock spire, we veered up and then performed a series of aerial somersaults. I clicked the stirrup once, and we leveled out again, soaring back to the arena and landing elegantly on the floor.

We got a perfect score of nine out of nine! Another victory!

Then was Snotlout's turn. As he positioned himself confidently in a standing-up position on Hookfang's neck, Tuffnut said to me, "I hear Snotlout's going to do a trick called the 'Rings of Deadly Fire'. No one's ever tried it before." My gaze went from skeptical to slightly worried.

"Because it's too dangerous?" Ruffnut hazarded. "No, because he just made it up!" Tuffnut exclaimed. I looked over at the immense wooden rings that had been set up in the arena. _I just hope he knows what he's doingâ€|_ I thought to myself.

"I'm probably going to win just for coming up with this," Snotlout bragged as he clamped his hands onto Hookfang's horns for balance. The Monstrous Nightmare made a wide upwards circle before coming back down toward the arena. "Fire!" Snotlout called, and Hookfang obediently shot a stream of flame that set the massive rings alight.

Snotlout's face tightened with determination, but as Hookfang saw the flaming rings coming closer and closer, he let out a panicked shriek. He pulled up at the last second, trying to avoid the fire. Snotlout lost his balance and was flung towards the rings â€" he slammed into one, and I winced. Everything tumbled apart in a huge pile of fire and wood. Snotlout came out of the pile screaming with pain, his trousers up in flames.

The crowd laughed at the ridiculous sight â€" it's not that us Vikings are insensitive, it's just that we find things such as that pretty funny. To put it bluntly, we have a very base sense of humor. Nevertheless, I didn't laugh, and neither did Spitelout.

As Snotlout jumped into the trough of water off to the side, Tuffnut muttered beside me, "I get the rings and the fire part, but where's the death?" His sister nodded sadly, agreeing with him. "I feel cheated," she sighed.

While the arena was being cleared for the final event, I silently

approached Snotlout, who was staring forlornly at the scoreboard â€" he was still in the lead with three points, Astrid and I were tied with two, and Tuffnut was lingering behind us with only one point.

When I was just behind my cousin, I chose to speak up. "Wow, Snotlout," I commented, causing him to turn around with a strangely blank expression on my face. "Your dad looks really mad right now." We both looked up to see Spitelout shaking his head at his son.

"What do you know?" Snotlout said rudely, suddenly defensive. "He always looks like that! Do you really think you have any shot at beating me?" He laughed skeptically and puffed out his chest.

I pretended to think. "As a matter of factâ€¦ I do have a shot at beating you," I said casually. "Do not," Snotlout countered stubbornly. "Do too!" I replied, raising my voice. "Think about it, Snotlout â€" Toothless is a Night Fury, and I'm the best rider on Berk. How could I possibly lose?"

Snotlout looked furious. "Because that's what you do!" he shouted. "I win, and you lose!"

I told him defiantly, "Check the scoreboard, Snotlout. Not anymore!"

He glanced at the board, and stomped off, muttering incomprehensible gibberish to himself.

"What was that all about?" To my credit, I didn't jump at the suddenness of Astrid's voice. I turned to her and said dismissively, "Just rattling cages."

As I walked off, she followed me. "Since when do you 'rattle cages'?" she pressed, face both puzzled and serious.

But then came time for the next event, and her interrogation was cut short. "The last event is the Fly-n-Shoot!" announced Mulch. "The contestants must shoot down their enemies and spare their friends!" He clanged his hook off of Bucket's bucket to signal the start of the last event.

A maze of sorts was set up around the arena, and as we traversed the maze, a wooden effigy of either a Berk villager or an Outcast would pop up randomly. It was our dragons' job to shoot down the Outcasts, and our job to point out what not to destroy.

Everyone did decently well, but there were inevitably a few mistakes made. Toothless and I were the only ones that made it out with a perfect score, although Astrid and Stormfly came pretty darn close with only one mistake under their belts.

When Snotlout's turn came, Hookfang went crazy when he accidentally blasted a sack of flour, causing the powder to fly up and blind him. The unseeing Nightmare shot flame after flame randomly around the arena, burning down everything in sight as Snotlout desperately tried to bring him under control.

Out of all of us, the twins were the only ones that were enjoying the

whole thing. "Snotlout, Snotlout, oi oi oi!" they cheered in unison.

Mulch checked the scoreboard briefly as a point was added next to my portrait. "For the first time in Thorfest history, we have a tie!" he shouted enthusiastically "indeed, Snotlout and I were neck and neck. "Tomorrow, these two young Vikings will go head to head to decide the Thorfest champion!"

Both Snotlout and I stepped forwards and waved to the cheering adults. "You don't know how lucky you are," Snotlout said from the corner of his mouth. "You don't even belong on the stage with me."

I shrugged off the comment. "That's it, keep talking," I said, "as your family's history as Thorfest champs goes up in smoke " just like your 'Rings of Deadly Fire'." Snotlout had nothing to say except another strangled, unintelligible sound.

"Hiccup," Astrid said to me, a warning in her voice. I didn't heed it, instead saying to myself, "Oh, he's crumbling under the pressure, I can feel it." An uncharacteristically malicious grin spread widely across my face, much to Astrid's disapproval.

"What?" I asked, dropping the grin. Astrid's face suddenly became sad. "You know what I always liked about you?" she said. "You were always a gracious loser. "Who knew you'd be such a lousy winner?"

She couldn't even muster up the strength for a good punch to my shoulder like she usually would. She just bumped her fist to my shoulder and walked off with the rest of my friends.

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****Gobber's Forge****

"Lousy winner" I muttered to myself determinedly as I finished Toothless' new connecting rod, the last part of our new riding gear I had to make. "I'm going to be a great winner."

Toothless looked up and gurgled happily as I approached him with the newly finished metal piece. "See this, bud?" I asked. "It's lighter and thinner. It'll make us fly faster and turn quicker."

I didn't notice the Night Fury's eyelids drop skeptically.

"But this," I continued, holding up a brand new tail fin, over which the old cover was spread, newly cleaned and patched up to get rid of the wear and tear. "This is what's going to make the most difference. This tail is as thin as parchment and even stronger than before. We will be able to cut and turn better than we ever have. Snotlout won't have a chance."

Toothless twisted his head to look at me and glared slightly. If I had been thinking clearly, I would have definitely noticed his disapproval "but I was too drunk on the thought of finally beating Snotlout at Thorfest, after all these years of humiliation.

It was only in hindsight that I realized that this wasn't a good

thing.

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****Arena, Next Afternoon****

Toothless and I stood at the entrance to the arena as the crowd filed into their seats to watch the final event for the Thorfest dragon games. My dad was there as well, helping me put on and adjust Toothless' riding gear.

"Remember, son," he said, getting up after the last check was made. "No pressure." He chuckled and made his way out and up to his usual seat with the other high-ranking Vikings.

Shortly before Mulch announced the start of the final event, I watched Spitelout saunter over to his son, who was stretching next to Hookfang. But instead of encouraging him, it looked more like he was threatening him. Although I couldn't hear what was being said, Snotlout came out of the conversation looking frightened, but that soon wore off. _What was that?_ I asked myself.

"Welcome to the final deciding event of this year's Thorfest games â€" the obstacle course race!" shouted Mulch. "Take it away, Gobber!" He passed his horn to Gobber, who stood in front of a painted map of the planned course.

"The race'll start here, in the stadium!" he yelled, pointing to the map. "After the log dodge, an' the cliff climb, Hiccup and Snotlout will get on their dragons, loop around our flagship anchored off the coast, spiral through the sea stack maze, an' head back here! The first one to pass that finish line is the winner!"

Snotlout and I took our positions at the starting line. "I, uh, just wanted to say," I began awkwardly, holding out a hand, "uh, have a good race and, umâ€¦ may the best Viking win." He slapped my hand away and said confidently, "Oh, he will. Don't you worry your scrawny little self about that."

He turned his attention to the huge ramp ahead, and I muttered, "If that's how you want it."

Mulch shouted for us to take our positions. We did so.

"On yer markâ€¦" We crouched.

"Get setâ€¦" We tensed up.

"Andâ€¦ GO!" Mulch clanged his hook against Bucket's bucket for the last time, sending a metallic noise ringing throughout the arena.

"Outta my way!" Snotlout shouted, shoving me aside and dashing for the ramp. As I got up, he made his way up the ramp, dodging each log the Vikings at the top threw down. By the time I had gotten past that obstacle, barely avoiding the heavy lumber, Snotlout was already climbing the cliff toward Hookfang.

I approached the cliff in time to see a falling rock bash Snotlout in the face, not even fazing him. "Ooh, rock to the face!" I heard

Tuffnut cheer. "I love a good rock to the face!"

By the time I had made it halfway up the cliff, I saw Snotlout wave, then mount Hookfang and take off. I was just about to start hauling myself up again, when another falling rock fell close to me, startling me enough for me to reflexively let go of the cliff.

I heard the distant crowd's gasps and screams as I fell. I was almost to the bottom when I managed to snag my prosthetic on a nook in the cliff wall, stopping my descent. Pausing only a moment to collect myself, I clambered up the cliff again, this time faster and more determined than before.

I made it to the top only two minutes later without casualties. I instantly boarded the waiting Toothless, slipping my foot into the stirrup. "OK bud," I panted, "we have a lot of ground to make up. Let's go!"

Toothless spread his wings and leapt, screeching as he sped off across the water at a speed that was frankly dizzying. I watched the rock spires whip past us in a blur as we rapidly neared the flagship that was anchored some distance away.

Snotlout hadn't yet cleared the flagship, but he was quickly getting there. We closed in on him so fast I had to blink in order to make sure that I wasn't seeing things. But in only a few seconds, Hookfang had carved a tight arc around the anchored boat and blazed past us — or more accurately, we blazed past him.

"How's that feel?" he called back, laughing. "We'll see who's laughing after we win this!" I thought furiously as Toothless flew past the flagship and turned gracefully in their direction. We were once again coming up on Snotlout's tail, but it seemed that Toothless was tiring as he slowed down to a more comfortable, yet still blistering, speed.

"Alright, bud," I said to him, "let's see what this new tail can do." Toothless grunted in determined agreement as I clicked the stirrup. Both tailfins automatically flared, and Toothless shot forward so fast I was momentarily blown back in my seat.

In the space of only two seconds, Snotlout and Hookfang were just in front of us. We could have easily overtaken them if it weren't for the rock spire maze, which we had just entered. I steered Toothless expertly on the winding course we were so used to flying, keeping a close eye on Hookfang as we followed the Nightmare's every move.

"Move over!" I instinctively shouted in frustration, as we flew through a tight canyon formed by a pair of rocky cliffs. "Yeah, sure!" he shouted back, sarcastically, and Hookfang roared defiantly. I was so caught up in beating the two of them that I didn't notice the immense rock spire, bigger than all the rest, looming in our path.

Toothless managed to get enough space to squeeze in next to Hookfang in the canyon, but the other dragon bumped us into the wall, causing us to lose a little bit of distance between Snotlout and I.

That was when we suddenly notice the rock spire in front of us, mere

meters away. Both of us yelled in panic and reflexively steered our dragons in different directions.

I saw through the blurred gaps in the numerous spires that we were headed away from the arena. I cursed mildly under my breath and increased Toothless' speed. I knew this maze well, and I could tell that we'd be able to loop back around and rejoin Snotlout and Hookfang on the shorter route to the finish line. I clicked the stirrup again as soon as we broke free from the main body of the spire maze, and we put on another incredible burst of speed.

Toothless screeched, the sound echoing multiple times off of the rock arches and walls that we flew past. I could practically hear the Vikings' shouts and cheers as we neared the arena. "OK, bud, let's finish this," I murmured as Snotlout quickly came into view again.

The Monstrous Nightmare was ahead, but that was easily remedied. All I saw was an orange-and-red blur as we streaked past, narrowly avoiding the wall of the tight canyon we had entered into.

But time seemed to slow down. Indeed, when I looked smugly over at the other boy, all I could see was his face. He was looking very depressed, and very frightened. All of a sudden, I remembered the sight of Spitelout supposedly threatening his son before the race had started.

I dropped the defiance and confidence. All of my arrogance was seemingly ripped away by the wind tearing past us, to be replaced with the contents of the newly formed shell of pride and self-satisfaction. I found myself again in that single moment.

"No, no! I can't lose, I can't lose!" Snotlout wailed, but at the same time it was spoken in a whisper. I turned back to face the front as we passed him, but suddenly, my heart was no longer with the concept of winning. "What am I doing?" I asked myself. I didn't know what had happened, but I knew how to fix it.

I had to let my cousin win.

"Sorry, bud," I told Toothless sadly, and clicked the stirrup for a final time. The tailfin collapsed, and we went into a slightly controlled crash onto the ground we had just passed over. I watched Snotlout breeze on to the finish line.

Strangely, Toothless didn't seem upset that we had lost, intentionally or otherwise. I was bewildered when he gave me a satisfied nod and licked my cheek.

I clicked the stirrup once more, and once more we rose into the air. Instead of speeding forward, we soared into the arena and made a leisurely landing. All of the Vikings were applauding Snotlout, some more enthusiastically than others. Arachne in particular, I saw, looked glum.

I hopped off of Toothless' back to join Snotlout on advancing up to the center stage. "Nice flying, Snotlout," I complimented him graciously. "Thanks," he said, glancing at me. "You know, you put up a really good fight â€" but not good enough." He laughed as he yanked

his outstretched hand away from mine, quickly denying the offered handshake.

And I found nothing but joy in that rude gesture.

"It's been a spectacular Thorfest games," Stoick announced. "Perhaps the best ever! These two young men have put on quite a show, but alas, there can be only one champion. The Thorfest dynasty continues with our winner and still champion â€" Snotlout!"

Everyone cheered, and Stoick handed my cousin his medal. He held it up proudly, doing a happy little dance on the spot while bellowing, "Snotlout, Snotlout, oi oi oi!"

My dad put a hand on my shoulder, encouraging me to look up at him. "You did your family proud, son," he said to me with a smile on his face. I shrugged and smiled back.

The end of the Thorfest games was usually celebrated by a party held at the arena, but all I really wanted was some rest. I yawned and stumbled out of the arena, Toothless nipping at my heels.

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****Berk Village (Toothless' POV)****

As I followed Hiccup down the path to his house and through the village. I suddenly became aware of another presence, somewhere close. Somewhat tiredly, I looked around, wondering who it was and why they were there.

Slowly, she made herself known. The Skrill climbed down headfirst from the house she was sitting on and stepped into my path. "That wasâ€¦ impressive," she said hesitantly, as if saying those words were an effort. I just looked at her and tried to move on.

Rilebolt stopped me, and looked at me with pain in her eyes. "This is awfully hard for me to sayâ€¦" she told me, swallowing as if she were literally swallowing her pride. "Butâ€¦ for onceâ€¦ I don't think you really were that bad."

I blinked, surprised and â€" although I would never admit it â€" touched by the compliment. "Well, thank you," I replied, indeed thankful for the pseudo-compliment.

"Not that we're suddenly best friends or anything," Rilebolt hastily amended. "I still hate you. Justâ€¦ maybeâ€¦ a little less than beforeâ€¦ I meanâ€¦" The Skrill drew herself up and lashed me with her tail before bolting off into the air and out of sight.

Another thing I would never admit â€" the cut left by her tail spines felt really, really good. _She's not all bad,_ I found myself thinking

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****Hiccup's House (Hiccup's POV)****

The sun was already setting when I finally made my way up the steps

to my house. Toothless went in eagerly, ready for a long sleep after all the flying he did today. I remained outside, enjoying the sunset as it shimmered on the waves and sank below the horizon.

I suddenly felt something crash into my shoulder, hard. I yelped in pain and reflexively turned around. It was Astrid, grinning as she sat down next to me on the porch. "I see what you did there," she hinted, nudging me.

I managed to keep a cool expression and to play dumb. "Yeah," I replied. "I lost as usual" Astrid just shook her head and grinned. "You threw the race," she said, crossing her arms and daring me to disagree.

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about, Astrid," I stammered, looking away. "Snotlout was just the better Viking today." But despite my denials, I was smiling inwardly.

"No, Hiccup," Astrid said, leaning in with a smile. "No one was a better Viking than you today."

And then she closed the distance between us and kissed me on the mouth. Immediately, I felt warm and fuzzy as I wrapped my arms around her and reciprocated gleefully. I felt her hand come up to clutch at the back of my head as she pressed herself closer to me and continued the kiss.

It went on for several long, passionate minutes, with neither of us bothering to stop long enough in order to take a breath. I heard Astrid moan quietly in contentment as I suddenly pushed forward, forcing her to lean slightly back as I tilted my head and deepened the kiss as far as it would go.

Even when I thought we couldn't go any further, I felt her tongue slip in to make contact with my own, and the contact seemed to encourage her into lunging forward, pinning me to the ground without ever breaking our embrace.

Finally, we slowly stopped the make-out session. Both of us were blushing furiously from the heat as Astrid lay down on top of me and rested her head on my neck. But we stayed together for a while after that, enjoying the simple peacefulness of lying together on the porch.

After a little while, she got up, allowing me to sit up as well. We held hands for a few minutes as we watched the sun finish its journey to disappear below the horizon. We held each other in a tender hug as the sky darkened and stars began to break out.

Inevitably, the time came for us to part. Astrid kissed me again â€" a slow and passionate one that lasted several seconds, which let me feel once more her surprisingly soft, tender lips against mine â€" and breathed in my ear, "Good night. See you tomorrow, my champion."

Those last words thrilled me more than I could imagine. I stood there gazing after her for a minute or two before dazedly walking into my house.

Toothless was already in his bed when I climbed up the stairs. He

raised his head and gave me a sleepy, questioning look. "What are you looking at?" I asked as I climbed into bed and rested my head on the pillow.

I slept my best that night, the best in a long while.

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Yep. Second again.

Some things never change, but I guess some things are more important than winning. Like being a good friend.

Even if that friend isâ€| that guy.

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Like I said earlier, I'm losing interest in this fanfic in favor of another budding idea. I'm still trying to get these chapters done, but I'm impatient to start on my newest story.

**To make up for that, I'm giving you my best Hiccstrid scene yet. Hope that helps ;) **

Review and see you soon!

40. What Flies Beneath

A bit of trivia for you, readers - I had originally planned to stop the fanfic after Chapter 25, but when this episode came out, I was inspired to extend the story.

More pleasure for you readers. Honestly, you have no idea how lucky you guys are.

Matt: The only reason I wrote that was because I didn't think he'd be reappearing again. When I saw how much my readers liked Batwings, and when I realized that I, myself, didn't even want to let him go, I decided to change that.

Sorry if my words confused, worried, or even offended you. I'll get rid of that blasphemous sentence right now while I still can.

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Everybody has a past, even dragons. Sometimes, that past can come back to haunt them. And when it does, you're going to need to be there for them.

But what I never realized was that Toothless' past is much worse than most.

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Berk Village (Unknown POV)

All I could see was dirt and mud. All I could hear was it being

ground up in my jaws as I rapidly dug through it. I couldn't sense very many vibrations up above, as it was the dead of night and most creatures were asleep.

But what I could sense was what had drawn me here. I instinctively knew that there was a Night Fury on this island. Ever since that one old Night Fury, Tenebra, had given me that near-fatal bite wound, I had hated the species " which was odd, because my species and his species had a lot in common, and thus got along well.

But me being friends with a Night Fury " a rock sprouting legs and running through the boulder quarry was more likely. No, if there was one thing Fulgur and I shared, it was our hatred of Night Furies.

Sensing prey up above, I burrowed up underneath it, grinding up the clueless yak in my jaws and then swallowing. Re-energized by the quick snack, I dove back into the earth to continue my mission.

The killing of the last Night Fury.

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****Hiccup's House (Hiccup's POV)****

For the first time since Batwings left, I was having a troubled sleep. I had enjoyed the Siren's company, but it was kind of annoying if I accidentally bumped the headboard in my sleep and he fell down with a shriek right on top of me. Now, I had finally gotten used to sleeping peacefully every night.

Every night until this one, that is.

Toothless was restlessly pacing around the room, growling to himself and looking at the floorboards as if a Whispering Death could blast out of the wood at any moment. "Toothless, would you just go to sleep?" I murmured from my bed as he circled the room for the umpteenth time.

I thought it was a bad nightmare or a stomachache that was keeping him up, and nothing more. And in a way, I was sort of right.

It _was_ a nightmare, but this bad dream would become very, very real soon enough.

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****Berk Village, Next Morning****

There had been a big storm not too long ago, and the sky had been overcast for days on end. So this morning, it didn't come as a shock that the skies were gray and everything was darker than usual.

But what did come as a shock were the two huge holes dominating the pastures. They hadn't been there yesterday, and so must have been dug overnight. But how something could dig a hole that deep and that wide in a single night " and two of them to boot " I had no idea.

As me, my friends, and a few of the adults wondered and muttered to ourselves, Toothless stuck his head over the edge of the pit and

snuffled around it. All of a sudden, he reared up and flared his wings, roaring at the top of his lungs and looking around wildly as if expecting someone to come running.

"Whoa, hey!" I protested, firmly pulling on his leg in order to get him to calm down. He did, but kept glaring at the hole as if it were his mortal enemy. "It's just a hole, bud," I added, feeling him tense up as he sniffed around the pit again.

"It's not just a hole!" came an echoing voice from inside of the pit. We all looked into it in shock, only to see Bucket standing at the bottom. "It's like an underground village!"

Mulch came running up to the hole at the sound of Bucket's voice. "Oh, Bucket!" he sighed. "There ya are, I've been lookin' for you all night!" The clueless Viking adjusted his bucket and yelled back, "I'm sorry Mulch, but I think I finally found it. My happy place!"

Just then, there was an immense cloud of dust that shot up from the hole, blinding all of us. I heard Bucket's screaming as he was ejected from the hole and back onto the ground with us. We all cleared our vision and saw Bucket getting painfully up off of the ground. "Are you all right, Bucket?" Stoick asked. "I'm not so happy anymore," he replied, voice growing more horrified. "Somethin' pushed me out! Somethin's down there, somethin' big!"

Just then, Toothless could no longer contain his built-up tension. He roared and jumped down into the hole, vanishing from sight. I ran to the edge, joined by several of the others – only to feel the ground begin to tremble and the atmosphere suffused by an ominous whispering sound.

"What is that?" Astrid murmured. "Wha'ever it is, it's givin' me the willies!" Gobber replied, shuddering and backing away from the hole.

The whispering increased in volume ever so slightly, and the tremors grew worse. "Hey," I said, almost to myself as I suddenly thought of something. "You don't think that's" –

But I never got to finish my statement, as a huge serpentine monster burst out of the hole in an immense cloud of dust and dirt. It hovered clumsily above our heads, whip-like body twirling constantly as it fought to keep itself in the air. It opened its jaws, revealing multiple rows of fearsome rotating fangs, but the only thing that ever came from its mouth was a very soft hiss.

"Whoa, look at the size of that thing," Arachne said in awe. "Nightshade?!" I asked in disbelief, but Astrid shook her head and wordlessly pointed at our gigantic adversary.

It was indeed a Whispering Death like our old friend, but there were several differences. It was over ten feet longer than Nightshade, and I noticed it was also significantly louder, although the added volume wasn't anything to bet your life on. Instead of a light blackish-grey, it was darker than night. And the look in its sightless eyes convinced me that it thought of us as anything but friends.

"Dragons, everyone!" Astrid instructed, and everyone jumped onto

their respective dragons. Stoick went to get Thornado, and I, temporarily without a dragon, mounted Spike, who was nearby.

We all stood ready for combat as the Death narrowed its eyes and looked at each of us in turn. Our dragons gave it challenging glares back. "I don't like the way it's eyeballing me," Snotlout said warily. "Uh, don't worry, it's not just you," Fishlegs assured him, albeit very nervously. "Thanks, big relief," my cousin said wearily.

The Whispering Death gave its louder-than-normal-yet-still-very-quiet hiss and dove back under the ground, its body cracking itself like a whip as it burrowed. Its tail vanished with a final *snap*, leaving no trace of it behind.

"Whatâ€¦ wasâ€¦ thatâ€¦?" Astrid asked dazedly. I knew she wasn't talking about its species â€" she was talking about the dragon itself. I had the same questionâ€¦ the bad vibe given off by that serpent didn't bode well for me. _Just what is this thing? And what does it stand for?_ I asked myself.

"Whatever it was, I want one," Tuffnut said dreamily. "Uh, guys, that was a Whispering Death," Fishlegs, well, whispered. "Oh, yeah, totally knew that," Tuffnut retorted. "Great name though. So much better than Zippleback." Belch gave an indignant, offended gurgle when he said that.

"Where did it go?" Bucket murmured, shivering. "Why is it here? What is it going to do to us?! WHY AREN'T YOU SLAPPING ME TO SNAP ME OUT OF THIS?!" Mulch replied honestly, "'Cause I'm scared too, Bucket!"

There was another tremor, and the huge dragon curled its way up out of one of the holes, teeth rotating to dislodge the soil and rock caught between them. "Aye, it looks angry," Gobber observed, turning to me. "Why doncha do that thing where yeh touch its nose an' feed it grass?"

I glared at him. "Um, okay, Fishlegs!" I yelled across to the large boy. "What do we know about the Whispering Death?" And to myself, I said, _Oh, if only Batwings and Nightshade were still here!_

Fishlegs instantly rattled off, "Boulder class, razor-sharp teeth, immensely strong, hunts from undergroundâ€¦" Before he could continue, Tuffnut said even more dreamily, "Ooh, now I really want one."

Snotlout snapped at Fishlegs, "So, how to we stop this thing?" But Fishlegs' reply was cut off by an immense roar. "Stand back, everyone!"

Of course, it was Stoick and his Thunderdrum. "Thornado has something to say to this beast!" Stoick declared, and Thornado released a whale-like howl that blew the clumsily flapping Death back several feet. But it didn't stay shocked for long â€" it reared up and met the Thunderdrum's massive gape with its own terrifying meat-shredder of a maw.

"I don' think it's got its listening ears on," commented Gobber.

"Alright, let's run this thing out of here!" Astrid cried, and everyone rose up on their dragons, backing Stoick up. The odds were now stacked at eight to one.

And then the odds increased by one. Evidently hearing the sounds of the budding battle, Toothless sprang out of the hole, giving a furious snarl at the Whispering Death. But then, the Night Fury turned back and growled at the other dragons. Instantly, the eight dragons backed up further into the sky, further away from Toothless and the Whispering Death.

"What's Toothless doing?!" demanded Snotlout, voice high from disbelief and panic. "I think he's telling us to stay back," Snaketail said incredulously. "No argument here," muttered Fishlegs, and Rilebolt clearly agreed with the boy, settling down on a rooftop to watch the battle, as if it were all for her entertainment.

"Toothless!" I cried as the two dragons glared heatedly at the other. One glare was a vivid, poisonous green, and the other was a pale, milky white. At the time, I couldn't decide which one was more terrifying.

My shout seemed to snap the dragons out of their temporary standoff. The Death lunged at Toothless, streaking across the ground and making a flexible turn when his bite missed. Toothless immediately lunged, dragging the other dragon to the ground and engaging in a temporary wrestling match.

The Whispering Death tried to constrict Toothless, but changed its mind and fled the second Toothless gave it that opening. Rising into the air again, it hissed hostilely, prompting Toothless to fire several plasma blasts at him. But sadly, all of them missed, as the Whispering Death was too agile. To me, it seemed, the Death must have had a lot of experience fighting Night Furies.

Meanwhile, Toothless struggled to get into the air, but didn't get far without two functioning tail fins. Unfortunately, the Whispering Death could clearly see this, if the sudden narrowing of its eyes was any indicator. It flew in a wide circle around the village, somehow enraging Toothless even more and making him re-double his efforts to get off the ground.

"Toothless can't fly without me!" I said as I urged Spike down to the ground. "He's a sitting duck for the other dragon!" Stoick nodded as he got off of Thornado. "Gobber, man the catapults, and when that thing is clear of Toothless, fire!"

I waved a hand in protest. "Dad, wait!" I cried, running over to the Night Fury. "Just let me help" but as I tried to get on the saddle, Toothless kicked me right off.

I was stunned and hurt by that gesture and not just because of the physical impact. "What? Toothless, what's wrong?" I murmured, and he momentarily glanced back at me before resuming his pursuit of the Death, now convulsed in hissing laughter.

"What was that all about?" Astrid asked me, but I didn't get the chance to answer. The Whispering Death cracked its body, sending at least seven of its spines whistling through the air to meet us. Three

impaled themselves on Toothless' leg and flank, but didn't cause any serious damage. Nevertheless, he shrieked in pain and plummeted to the ground again.

"Gobber!" Stoick shouted, and he got the hint. The blacksmith tugged the lever on his favorite catapult, Bertha, and flung a huge boulder at the Death. It slammed into it, but it only served to make the dark beast angry. It hissed and prepared for an attack on the catapult, only to be beaten back to another rock to the face. ("I love a good rock to the face," Tuffnut snickered in the background.)

What happened then was strange â€" the sun briefly shone from a gap in the grey clouds overhead, casting a wide yet lonely beam of light onto the Whispering Death. It immediately reacted, plowing itself into the ground and burrowing off to who knows where. This time, it didn't resurface.

Toothless instantly ran off, back toward my house. "Toothless, wait!" I called to no avail. "Where's he going?" Astrid asked. "Probably going away to lick his wounds," Snotlout chortled, and Rilebolt gave her own chirp of a laugh.

My temper shot up to the boiling point because of the two of them. "It's not funny," I spat, pointing up at Toothless and, in particular, the spines protruding from his flank. "Toothless could have been killed. He can't fly by himself, remember?"

Snotlout was far from put off, and neither was the Skrill, for that matter. "Aaand, whose fault is that?" he asked with a smirk. "Really?" growled Astrid. "Did you really just go there?"

Fishlegs hastily spoke up before another fight could break out. "Uhhh, does anyone want to talk about what in the name of Thor just happened?" Ruffnut tapped him on the shoulder and answered, "Duh, dragonfight. Just another day on Berk."

The large boy held his hands together nervously. "Uhh, not really. It seemed to me like there was way more going on than that." I nodded and replied, "He's right. The Death singled Toothless out, and Toothless wanted that dragon all to himself. But why?" I fell silent then, going deep into thought.

"Uh, are we going to be tested on this?" asked Tuff. "Because I'm completely confused." His sister shoved him away and said, "Well don't look at me!"

I could only stare up at Toothless grimly, and I didn't say a word after that.

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****Hiccup's House, Evening****

I finally managed to calm Toothless down enough to let him inside again. Treating his wounds with care, I pulled out the three spikes and rubbed healing ointment on the punctures while he waited patiently. "I just really wish you could tell me what was going on out there today," I muttered, when there was suddenly a thumping noise traveling up the stairs.

Toothless instantly went rigid and growled suspiciously at a shocked Stoick. "Easy, bud, it's just my dad," I told him, but he didn't calm down much.

"How's our wounded warrior?" Stoick asked, walking further into the room. "Well, he's still a little on edge," I said, slightly worried.

Stoick patted Toothless' head with a short laugh. "Don't worry, Toothless â€" I think we showed that dragon a thing or two about uninvited guests on Berk. I don't think he'll be coming back anytime soon." Toothless just stared at him, unconvinced.

"At least, I hope not," he added uncertainly. "Yeah, me too," I said as my dad walked back down the stairs. I finished rubbing the ointment on Toothless wounds and said in a satisfied tone, "Alright, that should do it. You just have to take it easy." The Night Fury gurgled and settled down on his bed, heating it up with a blast or two of fire.

I climbed into my own bed, gazed for a few seconds at the comfortable dragon, and blew out the candle on my table.

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****Berk Village, Next Morning****

"TOOTHLESS!" I called loudly into the early morning air. I had woken up with absolutely no sign of the Night Fury to be found that morning. I was seriously worried now, as I ran to another part of the plaza and called again.

Without warning, Rilebolt was there, a curious look in her eyes without even a hint of concern. _Lost your Night Fury?_ she seemed to be asking with a hint of smugness. "Shut up," I muttered, then turned away from her.

"Oh noâ€"|" I said to myself. "Toothless went after him. â€"Alone."

I immediately went about gathering the others and calling them to the arena. When we were all assembled, I explained the situation. Everyone looked just as worried as I was by the end â€" except Snotlout, obviously.

"Maybe Toothless just went for a morning flight," he said reassuringly, then added, "Oh, that's right, he can't." He snickered madly at his mean little joke.

Astrid was never slow to defend. "Really. You're going there again? I oughta" â€" I held a hand in front of her, stopping her advance. "Toothless must be looking for that Whispering Death," I said quickly, keeping us back on track. "We find it, and we find Toothless."

Fishlegs piped up, "What do we do if we find the Whispering Death first?" I told him soothingly (for his timid side was beginning to show again), "Well, we train him."

Tuff cut in, "You do know that he has 'death' in his name, right?" I ignored him and instead asked Fishlegs, "Is there anything about the

Whispering Death in the Book of Dragons that could help us?"

He flipped through the book until he found the right chapter. "It can shoot razor-sharp spines from any part of its body," he offered. "And how's that going to help us?" Snaketail asked harshly " she wasn't exactly a morning person. "Well, it would help if we stayed away from those," Fishlegs responded indignantly.

"Or we could get near them and use Ruffnut as a human shield!" Tuff suggested, only to be met with a savage kick to his knee. "OW! My kneecap!" he howled, then smiled up at his scowling sister. "That's new. I like it."

I turned back to Fishlegs and prompted, "This dragon must have a weakness." He shrugged and replied with surprising calm, "Actually, no. It says right here " no known weaknesses." Tuff looked at the book over his shoulder and chuckled. "Heh, I really love this thing."

I was running out of patience as I hopped onto Spike. "Can we go, please?" Snaketail asked. "We're running out of time." Everyone got on their dragons and prepared to take off.

"Don't worry, Hiccup," Astrid reassured me. "We'll find him." With that, her and Stormfly lifted up out of the arena and into the air, followed by the rest of us.

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****Underneath the Berk Woods (Whispering Death's POV)****

I dug on, growing increasingly frustrated. I must have tunneled throughout half the island by now, without any luck. I paused as my tunnel broke through the wall of another I had made previously, and I stopped for a break, looking around at the maze of tunnels I had created.

"Where are you, you ssssstupid Night Fury?" I growled to myself, not easy to do for a dragon with vocal chords the size of mine. Wordlessly, I selected a likely tunnel and slithered through it with all speed.

At least after this, my job would be finally over. Almost three hundred years of hunting down and exterminating the Night Furies were beginning to take their toll. Hopefully, I'd be done in a few more days at most, and Fulgur would give me a much-deserved break.

I'll get that Night Fury for what his father did to me all those years ago, I seethed. I'll get my revenge soon enough, or my name isn't Umbra.

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****(Hiccup's POV)****

We flew just over the tops of the trees in the woods, scanning the ground in all directions for any sign of Toothless or the Whispering Death. The twins complained that we should be "searching the sky for the two flying reptiles", when I got irritated and harshly reminded them that one dragon couldn't fly and the other one burrowed

_under_ground.

"There!" Arachne suddenly yelled, and pointed down. "Down below!" Indeed, there were a series of holes dominating a clearing in the middle of the woods. We urged our dragons down, prepared to land.

Getting off our dragons once we had landed, we crept up to the holes to investigate. I called immediately for Toothless, but didn't get a reply.

"How do we even know the Whispering Death made these holes?" Snotlout asked. "Oh, so you think it might be the other hundred-and-fifty pound, dirt-eating dragon we're following," Astrid challenged with a smirk. Snotlout stared at her blankly before stammering, "I know what you'reâ€¦| â€¦|Don't try to confuse me!"

I noticed a long, sharp object on the ground and picked it up cautiously. It was bone-white, and a single, accidental scratch was enough to draw blood. "He must have lost a tooth," I said. "Is it sharp?" Ruff asked. "'Cause if it is, I like sharp."

Fishlegs peered at the tooth, and then the hole. "Think about hundreds of those spinning together, ripping through dirt and tree roots, discarding rock like it's not even there!" he said, simultaneously excited and frightened.

All of a sudden, I noticed that the dragons were getting restless. "What's wrong with you dragons?" Snaketail asked. "Barf, settle down!" Ruffnut told her.

"Stop!" I said suddenly, a little on edge. "Listen." Everyone quieted down, when Tuffnut called, "Listen to what? What are we listening for?"

Astrid hissed at them, "Be quiet!" As soon as they settled down, I felt a slight vibration under my feet, and the ground began to shake gently. A sound that reminded me of a thousand whispering voices reached my ears. "The whisperâ€¦|" Fishlegs gulped.

"Looks like we beat Toothless," Snotlout said nervously, as the tremors got worse, the hissing got louder, and the sound of crumbling rock and shifting dirt made itself known. "Yeah, we win," Astrid agreed unenthusiastically.

And then there was an explosion of dirt, and we couldn't see anything. A harsh, growling hiss emanated from within the midst of the dirt cloud, and Fishlegs could be heard screaming, "I don't feel much like a winner!"

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****Not the best cliffhanger, but meh.****

****On an unrelated note â€¦** I came across a Pokemon fanfic called "The Extended Unova Pokemon Guide" written by someone named "The Gentleman Xerneas" or something like that, and it's giving me heavy inspirations for my planned Pokemon fanfic. In particular â€¦ Cofagrigus and Frillish are pure evil and eat/torture/kill humans for the fun of it, and it's possible for a human and a Pokemon to fall in

love with one another. This'll be funâ€| *Cofagrigus grin***

Anywho, next chapter will be up soon, so look forward to it!

Umbra: "Review thissssssss chapter, or I'll come after you once the lasssst Night Fury hassssssss been sssssslainâ€|"

41. Umbra's Grudge

Argh, my imagination hates me! I just got glorious inspiration for two more fanfics! That does it, I'm putting half of my to-do list on indefinite hiatus in order to get all of this crap done!

-.--.-.-.

The clouds of dust faded, and the Whispering Death was revealed in all its ugly glory. It shot down at Fishlegs, and at the last moment it stopped and dipped its snout threateningly to his level, baring its rattling fangs. "Um, hi," Fishlegs quavered. "I'm liking the teeth!"

The Death hissed in apparent frustration and swiveled its head around, quickly glancing at each and every one of us. The dragons snarled threateningly at it, warning it to back away or suffer the consequences. Not wanting to risk a confrontation â€" or at least not seeing the dragon it was after â€" the Death plunged back under the ground.

"I hate it when he does that," Snotlout fumed. "Can you at least tell me why he does it?" The ground started shaking again, and we fought to keep our balance. Fishlegs nervously replied, "Maybe to huntâ€| maybe because it's coolerâ€| maybe to look for waterâ€| and maybe because _he can't stand the pressure of everybody always expecting him to have the answers!_"

Indeed, by now we were all looking at Fishlegs. "He's losing it," Tuffnut sang. "I know," agreed Ruffnut. "It's awesome."

Fishlegs suddenly went from frustrated and annoyed to morbidly terrified as the ground was torn apart behind him and our serpentine adversary resurfaced. "Someone hold it still!" Tuff cried. "I wanna pet it."

I took a deep breath and took a cautious step toward the Death. "Do you actually have a plan, or are you trying to get yourself killed?" Astrid demanded. I ignored her as I approached the dragon, who was plowing its jaws into the earth and tearing up the earth.

At last, I turned around and said determinedly, "If I can train it, maybe it'll leave Toothless alone." Then I continued my advance toward the suspicious dragon, still looking at my friends. "Right, so you are trying to get yourself killed," Snaketail muttered.

I turned around just in time to see the Whispering Death nearly on top of me. By reflex, I held out my hand, and it stopped just in front of me, forgetting its destruction for a second. Everyone

squinted their eyes shut, not wanting to see the outcome.

I hesitantly nosed my arm closer to the Death's snout. Its nostrils worked as it inhaled my scent, and its milky eyes regarded me almost curiously. But then it changed its mind, just as I thought my plan was working. It dove under the ground once more, vanishing from view.

I looked down into the hole. "OK, I know what you're thinking, and the answer's no," Astrid told me, looking at me worriedly. I set my jaw, faced the pit, and jumped in regardless. If I could learn something about this dragon and why it was here, maybe that something would be in its lair.

It was dark despite the circle of light I stood in right now. I could barely make out anything more than twenty feet away, although I saw large spots of deeper darkness that were most likely other tunnels, winding even deeper into its hideaway.

All of a sudden, there was a scream, and Fishlegs landed on his stomach behind me. "Oh, thanks, Fishlegs," I said to him, helping him up. "I kinda figured you'd be the last person to follow me down here." He nervously stuttered a reply, "U-Uh, yeah! I-I didn't w-want for you to have to f-face that thing alone!"

Just then, there was a distant, echoing hiss that came from further down the tunnel, but nothing leapt out at us. "This thing's been busyâ€|" I murmured, wandering down the tunnel, and with Fishlegs hesitantly following.

"Quick question," he gulped. "Why are we down here again?" Not even looking at him, I replied, "This is where it spends all of its timeâ€|" there has to be something down here that can help us."

I peered down a side tunnel, just in time to see the Whispering Death's vague outline as it wound through the darkness on the other side. "There it goes, let's follow it!" I whisper-called to Fishlegs. When I got no reply, I glanced over at him. Fishlegs hadn't budged an inch.

"Oh!" he said with false surprise. "You were talking to me?" I gestured down the tunnel. "Fishlegs, new dragon! You love this stuff!" I waited while he wrestled with his mind. Finally, he stamped a foot and fumed, "I hate that about me!" And he followed grudgingly.

I don't know how far or for how long we had walked, but the Whispering Death's tunnels seemed to go on forever. We tried to stick to the main path as much as possible, peering into the side tunnels in hopes of catching a glimpse of our quarry. But the only thing we ever heard from it were its distant hisses or tail cracks, which unnerved me.

Shafts of light occasionally shone down from wide holes in the ceiling, and we used those to guide our way. One of them saved our lives, as at one point the Whispering Death suddenly lurched out from a side tunnel, and only because of the light we were able to see it in time to hide. It passed us with a soft hiss, heading deeper into its labyrinth.

It had almost completely gone when Fishlegs gasped. "Hiccup did you see"- the Death turned in an instant, moving with astounding speed as it reacted to the unexpected noise. I clapped a hand over his mouth and we dove back into our hiding spot. "Can it wait?" I hissed rhetorically.

The Whispering Death moved much slower and much more cautiously now. It was right next to us when it stopped completely, and its spines stuck out as it apparently detected something only it could hear. I was busy watching the back of its head, trying to see if it would move on ahead, when Fishlegs nudged me, and pointed to the Whispering Death's skin.

There on its neck was a circular series of nasty-looking, dark red scars. But just then, the Death took off with all speed, evidently following whatever it had detected.

When we were sure it was gone, we stepped out from our hiding place. "Was that a bite mark?" I asked him. He nodded and said, "Not just any bite mark â€" a _Night Fury_ bite mark."

It all dawned on me just then. "They have a historyâ€|" I murmured. "A grudge," agreed Fishlegs. "How long do dragons carry a grudge?" I asked, and he swallowed. "To the death," he squeaked nervously.

I shook my head. "But that bite mark was too large for Toothless' jaws to have made," I muttered. "Know what? It doesn't matter. Let's get out of here before it comes back." Fishlegs grinned and said enthusiastically, "That is a _really_ good idea."

We hightailed it back the way we had come, retracing our steps and hoping that the Whispering Death wouldn't suddenly burst from a random side tunnel again.

-.-.-.-.-

****Berk Woods (Astrid's POV)****

"They've been down there forever!" I exclaimed, worriedly clutching at the sides of the hole. I bent down and screamed, "Hiccup! Fishlegs!"

Thank Thor, they almost instantly appeared at the bottom of the pit. "Yep, right here!" Hiccup confirmed, and I sighed with quiet relief. "We really need to get out of this hole!" Fishlegs squeaked, and after looking up and away from the hole, I could see why. A trail of disturbed earth was winding its way through the forest in the distance, and it was undeniably coming right for us.

"Fishlegs, you go first!" Hiccup yelled, apparently catching sight of their danger as well. "No argument here!" the other boy yelped as Hiccup helped him balance precariously on his shoulders. He reached out a hand, and Snotlout and I easily reached him. With effort, we pulled him up to relative safety.

That left Hiccup. "Hurry, grab my hand!" I yelled, as the sound of shifting dirt became audible, and growing louder by the second. Hiccup grunted, and jumped again and again as he did so, trying to reach my own hand. "I can't reach!" he shouted back, his fingers missing me by inches.

The earth trail shot closer at frightening speed and the ground began to tremble again. Hiccup made a last, desperate attempt to grab my hand, jumping with all his might. I reached down as far as I could go and felt his fingers latch firmly around my wrist.

Relaxing ever so slightly at his touch, I yanked with all my strength. But as I slowly lifted him up toward the surface, his hand, sweaty with fear, slipped. I gave a short gasp as Hiccup fell right back down to the bottom of the hole, with the tremors getting worse and the trail of dirt already almost on top of us.

"Everyone stand back!" he yelled up at us as we could suddenly hear the terrible sound of whispering over the cracking and crumbling of the earth. We all jumped back a fair distance before the pit exploded with dirt, sending Hiccup flying high into the air with a startled yell.

"Wow, I bet he can see our house from up there," commented Tuffnut in amazement.

But this time, the Whispering Death was quick to follow its helpless victim. As Hiccup began to fall, the serpent-like dragon launched itself after him, horrifying jaws open wide to catch its prize.

"Spike!" I cried, and the male Nadder obediently took flight, snagging the falling boy in his claws as the Death's maw snapped closed just beneath them.

Hiccup was dropped gently on the ground, with Spike landing just next to him and curling its tail around him protectively. "Thanks, Astrid," he said gratefully, but before I could reply, the Whispering Death made itself known again, this time glaring right at Hiccup and hissing menacingly under its breath.

"I don't think it likes you in its hole," Tuff said bluntly. "Can we get out of here?! Please!" Snotlout whimpered. "No," said Hiccup strongly, "I know I can train this thing. Does anyone have some dragon nip?"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth when Snaketail, Snotlout, and Fishlegs all handed him some of the strong-smelling grass. "Ooooookay," he murmured, screwing up his courage from the look of his posture.

The Whispering Death hissed again and backed away in flight as Hiccup advanced on it. "Don't be afraid," he said soothingly. He continued to mutter at the hovering dragon, which allowed itself to flap a few meters closer to Hiccup. He held out the dragon nip, and I held my breath as I saw the Death dip its head down to his level.

There was a long, silent pause.

Then the Whispering Death sneezed, and the dragon nip went flying all over. At the smell of the grass, all of our dragons flopped to the ground, relaxed, and went limp with contentment. "Great," objected Snotlout. "Now we're defenseless."

The Whispering Death regained its anger, and bared its hundreds of

fangs threateningly at us as it advanced. "Any other ideas?" Hiccup offered. "I'm throwing it wide open to the group."

A short moment of silence followed, when Snaketail piped up. "I've got a pretty good idea. RUN!" she shrieked, dashing off into the forest. We all followed suit, trying not to be the closest one to the enraged serpent.

With a hiss, it lunged forward, and I turned around to see Hiccup lagging behind, just out of reach of the dragon's snapping teethâ€|

-.--.-.-.

(Hiccup's POV)

I could hear the furious dragon's wings as it gave chase. They came closer and closer as I stumbled on the uneven terrain in a panic. I glanced back to see the Whispering Death practically on top of me, jaws wide open and ready to bite down. I redoubled my efforts to get away, knowing that it was probably useless and that it would catch me any second nowâ€|

A loud â€" and very familiar â€" shriek sounded out from the woods, and a black shape pounced on the Death, slamming into it and throwing it off to the side. I instantly knew who it was, and Astrid's voice punctuated the spark of hope that flared in my heart â€" "Toothless!"

He stomped his feet on the ground in an intimidating manner and spread his wings fiercely, ready to confront his rival. The Whispering Death hissed its challenge, more than ready to meet him head-on.

But all of a sudden, the other dragons were there, recovered from the effects of the dragon nip and furious at the Whispering Death for its actions against Toothless. It looked frantically from one to the other, looking almost afraid as the odds against it increased.

Finally, a lunge from Toothless seemed to convince it. It curled up its body as if about to attack, then plowed into the dirt, rapidly disappearing from view.

I rushed up to Toothless, only to have him kick me away and growl deep in his throat at me. I held my hands up cautiously and spoke firmly, but not unkindly. "Toothless, it's me! I know what's going on between you and that other dragon. Let me help you!"

I raised my hand even as the Night Fury calm down. But suddenly, he gave me a skeptical grunt and dashed off in pursuit of the long-gone Death. "Toothless, stop!" I called, running after him. But I hadn't gone far when he abruptly turned around and blasted the ground in front of me with a plasma blast. He was warning me not to follow him. He wanted to settle this on his own.

But if he was on his own, he wouldn't stand a chance.

I sighed miserably. "Awwwkward," Tuffnut said bluntly.

Then â€" "Ohhh, I am hurt! I am _very_ much hurt!"

-.--.-.-.

****Sky Over the Berk Woods****

We mounted our dragons and took off soon after Tuffnut calmed down. He was pretty much back to his old self, and he was even impressed that I had â€" know what, it didn't matter.

I was flying at the front of the group on Spike, with Astrid and Stormfly directly beside me. But all of a sudden, Hookfang cruised up and Snotlout struck up a conversation.

"So," he said casually. "Toothless has an archenemy. Kinda like you and me!" He suddenly puffed out his chest and eyed me hostilely. I rolled my own eyes and replied, "Snotlout, you are not my archenemy!"

Astrid flew a little closer and muttered, "He's just trying to protect you." I knew she was talking about Toothless from the reassurance in her voice.

But Snotlout was quick to contradict it. "Oh, that's not what it is. Toothless just doesn't want you around because this is between him and the other guy. He's a fighter, like me! Not â€" whatever you are."

I should have felt bad, but what I felt was a dawning reality. "I-I never thought I'd say this, but Snotlout? I think you're right!" He looked at me in amazement, then was rendered speechless. "Wai â€" huh? Youâ€| you guys heard that, right?" he asked the others, looking around in stunned awe.

"It's not a fair fight," I continued, heedless of his amazement. "If Toothless is going to win, he has to fly, and he can't fly without me!" Astrid looked over curiously and asked, "So, what are you saying?"

I thought a little before answering. "I'm saying â€" I'm saying we need to find him, and soon." She nodded and yelled back to the others to increase our speed.

I dimly heard Tuffnut asking his sister, "You think this black eye is a good look for me? 'Cause I think so. I kinda like it." I grinned to myself and steered Spike over the forest, keeping a sharp eye out for the distinctive black shape of a Night Fury.

-.--.-.-.

****Some Time Later****

"There he is!" I called from the Nadder's back, pointing to a black streak vanishing into another grove of pine trees. "Let's go down there," I instructed, and everyone followed me down to the forest floor.

We caught up to Toothless as he was busy sniffing along the grass, trying to locate his foe. The second Spike touched down, I leapt off of his back and warily approached the busy dragon, growling to

himself in frustration as he was unable to find any evidence of the Death.

No words had to be spoken " Toothless turned around, teeth slightly bared, but he dropped the menacing expression when he realized it was just me. His pupils widened and he gurgled a question at me.

But I had a question of my own to ask. Wordlessly, I held out a hand. _Do you still trust me?_

Toothless only hesitated an instant before replying. He nuzzled my hand with his head, and the simple gesture lifted a huge burden from my shoulders. "Hey, bud," I said softly as I cradled his massive head in my hands. "You had me so worried there for a while. You haven't been yourself lately."

Toothless nodded and warbled guiltily, the apology clear. I smiled and replied, "That's okay. It's good to see you're still you." He nodded in agreement.

But right on cue, the ground trembled, whispering filled the air, and the serpentine form of the Whispering Death blasted out from a hole in the near distance, hissing a challenge and glaring hatefully at Toothless. The Night Fury growled softly, and I tried to gently pull him away. "You can just walk away from this, bud!" I cautioned, but he leapt into a battle-ready stance.

"Let's just go home!" I pleaded, but he kicked me aside again and charged to battle. "You were so close that time!" Fishlegs exclaimed as he and the rest appeared behind me.

"He needs our help," Snaketail decided, running to mountHorrorcow. The rest of us clambered onto our own dragons and ran to help " only to be stopped by a roar from Toothless.

"Come on, girl!" Arachne pleaded with Rilebolt. "Hookfang won't budge!" Snotlout said incredulously. "They know this isn't their fight," Fishlegs observed, just as the scene in front of us began to unfold.

-.--.-.-.

(Toothless' POV)

My muscles were tense with anger as I leapt forward at Umbra, ready to finish this once and for all. I jumped as high as I could and readied a plasma blast, only to be stopped by my tailfin. Without Hiccup to work it, it was nothing but a hindrance. My blast missed as I was blown slightly off, and Umbra's spiked tail whipped me mercilessly in the flank.

I was flung to the ground, blood oozing from my wounds. Wincing, I got up painfully and made another jump. This time, the wind blew the tailfin open at the wrong moment, causing me to falter again and allowing Umbra the perfect opening to scorch me with a fiery whirlwind.

The pain wasn't bad " my scales were fireproof after all. But Umbra's soft, mocking laughter was what hurt me the most, instilling rage in my heart. "You call yourssssself a Night Fury?" he asked,

taunting me. "All I ssssssee is a pathetic, flightlesssss newt."

I roared in anger. "Speak for yourself, earthworm!" I shot back, giving into fury. I jumped again and again desperately at Umbra, slashing with my claws and flailing with my wings, but he flew just out of reach. He laughed quietly yet hysterically as he led me off deeper into the forest. He was laughing so hard he was unable to speak, and his flight turned awkward as he fought to keep himself in the air.

Suddenly, Umbra got a hold of himself and dove down at me with a savage bite. I dodged, only to have him twist his flexible body to face me once more. I turned, but not quick enough to defend myself from another fiery whirlwind.

This blast knocked me back a fair distance. I found myself on the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea. Despite this precarious position, I was still willing to fight. Umbra saw this and quickly burrowed through the rock and soil.

I realized his plan too late as a whole section of the cliff crumbled with a dull roar, tumbling into the ocean below. Now, I was trapped on a tiny little island of rock with no way to escape.

My island trembled, and Umbra burrowed out of the side and rose in the air. Before I even had a chance to think about attacking, he spat another whirlwind, one that was barely dodged. I vaguely noticed Hiccup and his friends running to the edge of the forest to watch helplessly, but none of that mattered now. The only thing I was focused on was taking Umbra down.

"Ssssstupid!" Umbra scolded me as I narrowly avoided another flame. "Give up now, and I'll kill you painlessssssssly!" I growled and thrashed my tail, working myself into an enraged frenzy. The fire of my anger had become an inferno that would only be doused if it had Umbra's dead body to smother it.

"No!" I shrieked. "You are the one that must die! My father must be avenged! _You killed him in cold blood_" Umbra paused only long enough to give another mocking laugh.

"He dessssserved it!" the Death howled. "I almossssst died! How wasssss I to know that Tenebra had family to protect? I didn't mean to sssssneak up on him!"

It was my turn to laugh even as I ran this through my mind. I vaguely remembered a scene from my carefree days, just out of the shell â€" the dragon I knew as my father's friend sneaking up behind him, only to receive a nasty bite and to fly off, crying with pain and anger. From my perspective, Umbra had looked like he really was trying to sneak up on him, but was he really? I shook my head and instead focused on the Whispering Death flying circles around me as he talked.

"I thought I could get back at him by taking the livessssss of hissss family," Umbra was saying. "But I knew that wasssssn't enough! All Night Furiesssss are my enemiiesssss, and you're the very lassssst one! I just have to kill you, precioussssss sssson of Tenebra, and my revenge will be complete! I've sssssaved the besssst for lassssst! Oh, thissss will be good," he added savagely, and closed in, ready to

finish me.

But I wouldn't back down. _I will die a brave Night Fury. I'll make my father proud._

"Toothless!" came the desperate voice, and I instinctively glanced over. It was Hiccup. _Hiccup. _Who would take care of him if I died? I supposed the Astrid girl could, but what if Umbra decided to go after him next? I cried out, the wave of terror my fury had suppressed washing over me like a tsunami. "Hiccup!" I shrieked, as Umbra circled me, savoring his imminent victory.

Our eyes locked just then. The look in Hiccup's orbs turned defiant. And, to my utter astonishment â€" he stepped off the cliff.

I screeched in horror, Hiccup's friends gasped and ran to the edge, and even Umbra looked shocked. I instantly knew that a decision had to be made in that moment â€" what was more important? Me getting my revenge on Umbra, or saving Hiccup?

I only had to think for a second to come to a conclusion. Hiccup was my best friend, the one who gave me back my life, and a live Hiccup was worth to me more than one thousand dead Umbras.

I jumped off the cliff and followed him down.

-.-.-.-..

(Umbra's POV)

I watched amusedly as the Night Fury plunged off the cliff after the human. "That'sssssss one for the hissssstory bookssssss," I said to myself. "A dragon sssssacrificing himssssself for a _human_. What are they teaching hatchlingssssss these dayssss?"

The only regret I had was that I didn't get to kill him. _Oh well, dead is dead_, I thought with satisfaction. _At least I can eat him afterwards. Then I can look forward to heading home for a nice, long nap_.

I shot a fiery whirlwind at the edge of the cliff for good measure, driving the other humans back as well as causing a small avalanche of rock. The boulders smashed down into the water one by one, causing an immense spray of spume to fly up into the air and obscure the Night Fury's fate from my vision. But as I watched, I could not believe my eyes.

To the wild cheers of the watching humans (which I barely noticed), the hated Night Fury shot out of the curtain of seawater, suddenly able to fly. It was then that I noticed that the _human_ was on his _back_, somehow keeping that artificial tailfin open enough for him to fly. _What in blazes is going on?_ I wondered furiously, already flying to take action.

All of a sudden, the battle took a dramatic turn, and not in my favor. The Night Fury was suddenly able to deftly avoid every one of my attacks, and strike back even quicker. I doubled back into the forest, flying close to the ground in case I needed to make a quick getaway.

And the need for said getaway came far too soon. The sun peeked through the clouds above, suddenly bathing the world in bright, hot light. I hissed in pain as I was blinded by the sudden illumination, and retreated back into my cool, comforting burrows.

I'll get that Night Fury very soon, I told myself. _All I need is an opening._

-.--.-.-.

(Hiccup's POV)

Toothless and I were flying again. That alone was a cause for celebration as we chased the Whispering Death back underground. For some reason, I knew that the battle wasn't yet over, and we had to force it to give up in order to finally end this madness.

But then I noticed a bright beam of sunlight pooling over the Death's most recent hole. We flew back to the cliff on which my friends stood, about to tell them to mount their dragons and go after the Whispering Death, when Fishlegs shouted at me. "The sunlight!" he cried. "The sunlight! That's its weakness!"

It all became clear as day to me now. I knew that it must have had a weakness, because there was no dragon that was invincible â€" even the Read Death had a weakness. And this Whispering Death's vulnerability was light. Made sense for a dragon that spent most of its time in darkness.

"OK, bud!" I decided. "Let's keep him above ground!" Toothless growled in agreement, ready to end this. We streaked up into the sky, then dove straight at the ground, aiming for the many holes the Whispering Death had dug all over the forest. We knew that it couldn't have gone far.

Toothless screeched, then fired five plasma blasts that rocketed down the holes and exploded with blinding blue light. The pillars of flame and light burst out from the holes and illuminated the forest, sending up a display that could be seen for miles.

When the fifth fire bolt hit, there was a sharp, pained hiss, and the Whispering Death shot out of the hole and blindly slammed into a rocky wall. Dazed, it hit the ground, thrashing madly as it fought to recover its eyesight.

Suddenly, it seemed to locate Toothless again. It actually snarled loud enough for us to hear it clearly, so great was its rage. It shot forward like it was hurled from a sling, but Toothless was too fast for it. We dodged the Death's lunge, and then I clicked the stirrup for a final time. Toothless charged, the force of the blow sending the Whispering Death flying and skidding across the ground.

Toothless leapt on top of his felled adversary, ready to deal the finishing blow. "Toothless, stop!" I yelled frantically, and the Whispering Death hissed in protest. The Night Fury paused, glaring into his enemies' fear-filled eyes. I got a huge moment of dÃ©jÃ vu just then.

There was a long moment of tense silence, before Toothless screeched

in the Whispering Death's face and tentatively backed away. Instantly, the Death slithered off before plowing its head into the ground. Within a second, it had burrowed into the ground and out of sight with a final hiss and a crack of its tail.

It didn't resurface.

My friends flew over on their dragons just then, Spike following behind Astrid and Stormfly. "That. Was. Amazing," Ruffnut said with emphasis, face wild with excitement. "We've got to get you an arch-nemesis," Tuffnut murmured to Barf and Belch.

"Aw man!" pouted Snotlout. "Toothless coulda finished him off!" I just smiled and replied nonchalantly, "I guess all dragon grudges aren't to the death after all." Toothless gurgled happily, agreeing with me.

Much later, however, that statement would come back to bite me in the rearâ€¦

-.---.--.

****Sky Over the Sea (Umbra's POV)****

I cursed myself repeatedly, over and over again, as I winged my way over the sea and away from the little island. Who knew that a crippled Night Fury would end up giving me the most frightening battle I've ever had? For a moment, I thought I would end up dead that time, and so close to my goal too.

But I had to plan strategically for next time. They now knew that sunlight was my greatest weakness. That human was able to ride with the Night Fury in order to give it the power of flight. And most importantly â€" that Night Fury was weak for having bonded with the human. The human had softened the once-merciless predator. Why else would he have let me go?

A fatal missssstake on hissssss part, I thought to myself. _Next time we meet, I mussssst desssssstroy that tail. Or, even betterâ€¦ I mussssst kill that boy._

I grinned to myself as the island faded into the mists. Fulgur would be very, very pleased at what I had learnedâ€¦

-.---.--.

When our past rears its ugly head, it usually doesn't have six rows of razor-sharp teeth and a bad attitude.

But if it does, you're going to need a friend who has your back. I will always have Toothless' back.

And he will always have mine.

-.---.--.

****The original idea for this chapter and the previous one was that Nightshade got into a fight with Toothless, earning her a permanent scar and an intense need for revenge, which eventually wanes and they end up patching things up.****

****Howeverâ€¦** I'm going somewhere with Umbra and the plot opportunities he opens, and he inevitably WILL be backâ€¦******

****Next chapter,** something a lot of you have been waiting for, is coming soon!******

****Hiccup:** "Um, uh, guys? Why don't you, uh, you knowâ€¦ um, review? You know, those areâ€¦ those are nice, right?"******

42. Legend of the Boneknapper!

****Hah,** my parent's are away for the weekend, so I've had endless hours to write! Thus, the next chapter's here already.******

****A lot of you have been asking for this, so here it is!** My personal favorite spin-off of the series, mostly because it's centered around one of my favorite characters â€" the tough-on-the-outside, soft-on-the-inside, lovable-on-both-sides blacksmith, Gobber.******

****So, let us start!****

-.--.-.-.

In every legend, there is always a bit of truth buried at its core.

So when my mentor Gobber claimed to have met a mythical dragon, I believed him. And I wanted to prove to others that he indeed was to be believed.

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****Berk Village (Hiccup's POV)****

I awoke to the sound of chaos. I ran out the door to see a bright, flickering light near the plaza. Knowing what it was all too well, I ran back inside for Toothless.

When we got there, we saw that the entire village had turned out to help put out the fire. As could be expected, my dad was there barking orders as usual. Three dragons flew out of the dark sky with huge barrels of water in their talons, dumping it on the burning house and putting out the worst of the blaze.

The most disturbing this of all, though, was the fact I knew the Viking that lived in that smoldering house very well.

Toothless landed, and I instantly ran for my dad, all of my friends following. "Where's Gobber?" I asked him frantically. "Is he still inside?" My father was about to answer when a familiar voice called out from the smithy.

"I'm right here!" he said, grabbing a bunch of weapons and lugging them forward in a wheelbarrow. "That beast'll pay fer thisâ€¦" he added, and several of us tilted our head in confusion.

"Gobber, what happened?" Stoick asked him seriously. "What's it look

like? A dragon set me home on fire!" he shot back angrily. There were a loud string of gasps and the crowd began to mutter in bewilderment.

Now Gobber raised his hook to the sky and yelled to no-one in particular, "Yeh've pushed me too far this time, yeh ugly bag o' bones!" Stoick let out a heavy sigh, and I turned to him in confusion. "Dad, what's he talking about. Our dragons don't do that anymore."

Stoick patted my back and replied, "He doesn't mean one of ours." Then to Gobber "Please, Gobber, for the last time. There is no such thing as a "

"Boneknapper?!" Gobber finished irately.

Everywhere I looked, Vikings were rolling their eyes and muttering to themselves again. "Whoa-whoa-whoa. What-knapper?" Tuffnut asked.

"The Boneknapper," Gobber answered him. "A disgusting, foul beast that wears a coat o' stolen bones like a giant flyin' skeleton."

Fishlegs was hopping up and down with excitement. "Ooh, ooh!" he chimed in. "The Book of Dragons says that this legendary dragon will stop at nothing to find the perfect bones to build its coat of armor. It's AWESOME!"

Stoick laughed mockingly. "Come on," he chuckled. "It's a myth! It doesn't even exist!" Gobber whirled on his friend and argued, "I'm tellin' ya, he's real. I've been runnin' from him me whole life. He's the one that started that fire!"

At that moment, Sven ran up, holding a stick on which hung a smoking pair of undergarments. "Stoick!" he called. "We found Gobber's underpants hanging by his stove. They must have started the fire."

The crowd burst into laughter, and Gobber turned red. "You still think it was a dragon, or just your undies?" Stoick challenged him, shaking with mirth and holding up the putrid garment.

"I don't think, I know!" Gobber shouted. "Somehow he found me again. This dragon is pure evil." Stoick sighed and gave him a look of pity. "Gobber, it's late, and we're too tired for your stories. Now get some rest."

Instead of accepting Stoick's request, Gobber snatched his skivvies back and stuffed them in his wheelbarrow. "You rest. I'm puttin' an end ta this." He then limped off with his wheelbarrow without another word, heading for the docks and gathering up his sheep Phil.

I watched Gobber go sadly. I never liked seeing Gobber looking so upset. There were never many days when he was in a bad mood, and those days had lessened since the dragons came here to Berk. So whenever he was feeling down, or angry, or even a little under the weather, I wanted to make sure he was alright.

I had to help him.

"I can't let him go all by himself," I muttered to my friends, who had gathered behind me as the older Vikings left. I turned to them and said determinedly (after a yawn), "Alright gang, grab your shields."

Everyone cheered, except Snotlout, who folded his arms. "There is no way I'm getting on a boat to go after a fake dragon."

-.-.-.-.-.

****Open Ocean, Morning****

"You were saying, Snotlout?" Snaketail said smugly over her shoulder as we rowed the boat through the water with all of our strength. Gobber kept encouraging us to row harder and faster, but it was taxing. After all, I wasn't exactly renowned for my physical strength. Even Astrid was having a hard time.

"How fun is this, right?" I asked everyone, trying to keep their spirits up. "We've got the team back together, another adventureâ€¦ this is pretty cool, huh?" The only reply I got was from a winded Snotlout, who said, "Yep, there's nothing cooler than rowing until your hands bleedâ€¦" He went back to rowing after a breather.

"I just want yeh kids to know," Gobber spoke up tearfully, "tha' it touches me heart tha' you volunteered ta help me slay the Boneknapper." He sniffled and added, "True Vikings, ya areâ€¦"

Ruffnut rolled her eyes and asked, "Are we there yet?" She grunted out her question as she tried to move her oar through the choppy water. "Oh, you'll know we're there when your ears explode from the piercing screams," Fishlegs said nervously. "Legend says the Boneknapper's roar is so fierce, it can rip the flesh right off your bones."

Gobber silenced him with a wave of his hook. "Not so, Fishlegs. The Boneknapper has no roar at all. Tha's why he's terrifyin'. He's a silent killer."

Snaketail raised a hand. "So," she began, "if we don't hear anything, we're dead?"

There was instant silence. "I don't hear anything," Tuffnut muttered.

Just then, Phil bleated loudly, causing us all to yelp. "Aha, good one, Phil," Gobber laughed. "Now, did I ever tell yeh how I met the dreaded Boneknapper?"

-.-.-.-.-.

****Ice-Sheathed Sea, Many, Many Years Ago (Gobber's POV)****

I was a young lad, about yer age, on summer vacation with me family, when I heard the call of nature.

I was rowing lazily along, admiring the icy summer sea, when I

suddenly felt that unmistakable feeling. "Dad, pull the boat over!" I squeaked, and he did with reluctance. "Didn't I tell ya to go before we left?" he asked as I picked up my axe and hopped off the boat.

I found myself a nice private spot in a glacier to do my business. Pulling up my pants, I picked up my axe and turned around. My eyes suddenly bugged at the sight I witnessed just then.

I saw an army of Vikings, frozen deep within the glacier! Clutched in the hand of one of 'em was a small treasure chest. I. Had. To have it.

Smirking and pulling my axe back, I swung it hard at the wall of ice, successfully smashing a deep hole in it. The treasure chest poked through, and I pulled it out with a bit of effort.

I reached in, and pulled out the chest. It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw! But the frozen Viking was still alive, and started punchin' me in the face!

"Oww, me tooth!" I exclaimed, feeling the bloody hole where my tooth used to be. Suddenly, the Viking's hand pointed to the sky, and he started mumbling something. "I can't hear ya!" I shouted. He pointed again and mumbled more urgently. I looked up just as a shadow flashed across the icy ground.

An' there it was. I never even heard it coming. The Boneknapper!

With a rattling scream, the dragon dove at me, razor-sharp talons thrown out and reaching for me. I ducked out of the way, only to see the Boneknapper smash into the wall with a mighty crash. The glacier cracked and shattered, massive pieces of ice tumbling down toward me as I ran for my life.

The dragon crashed into the glacier, causing an avalanche of frozen Vikings!

I ran up the icy slopes, treasure chest held out so it wouldn't fall. The Boneknapper rushed me again, snapping its claws shut just short of my hands. I tripped in shock and fell, the treasure chest tumbling across the ice and falling with a *plop* into the water. "The treasure!" I shouted, rushing to the water's edge.

I reached into the water, only to find the frozen Viking punchin' me in the face again!

Grabbing the treasure and trying to avoid the series of blows, I felt the dragon suddenly plunge onto the glacier, catapulting me up into the air. The golden treasure chest was thrown up with me, and I reached for it. I grabbed it successfully, and I shouted in triumph. But the Boneknapper snagged it in its claws and began to carry me off.

The _Boneknapper wanted the treasure, but I wanted it more!_

Another glacier was coming up fast. The Boneknapper seemed hell-bent on smashing me into the ice to make me let go. But there was a huge hole in the ice, and I realized that was my only chance of escape. I ripped the treasure free of the dragon's claws and dove through the

hole. I ended up travelling down a winding ice slide, which ended suddenly.

I slid off the edge, flying through the air again with a startled shout. I fell right into my parents' boat, clutching the treasure chest tightly. "What took ya so long?" my dad asked grumpily, and I shrugged nervously.

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****Open Ocean (Hiccup's POV)****

We were all speechless after Gobber's story. It sounded plausible to me, but that didn't lessen my amazement. A few other people, though, were still skeptical. "Are you expecting us to believe that a frozen Viking beat you up?" Snotlout chuckled.

"Yeah, twice!" he replied. Snotlout and the twins shook their heads. "Hey, it could happen," I replied, defending Gobber loyally. I swore I saw Astrid grin and roll her eyes, but that could have just been me.

"What do ya mean, it could happen? It did! But luckily I outsmarted the silent beast," Gobber added. "I hate being a stickler for detail," Fishlegs said, "but Boneknappers are not silent."

Gobber sighed. "Fishlegs, I know what I didn't hear! But I could feel it. I have this sense fer danger, I can smell it, I can taste the oncoming doom" â€

His speech was cut short as the boat suddenly splintered on a rock spire jutting out of the water. We looked around frantically, finding ourselves surrounded by mist and rocks.

We were back at Hel's Gate.

"I'm tasting rocks," Astrid muttered, but Gobber paid her no heed. "We're here!" he said with a satisfied grin.

We wasted no time in gathering our supplies and wading towards the shore. We made it on land just before the boat sunk into the sea. "Now we're stuck at the Dragon's Nest and no one even knows we're here!" Ruffnut complained.

"Except the Boneknapper," Fishlegs stated. "Legend says its roar" â€ Snaketail interrupted him. "Justâ€| stop talking," she said, swatting him. He obligingly stopped.

"No need ta panic, kids," Gobber said cheerfully, picking up a good-sized rock and sharpening his hook with it. "I've been shipwrecked many times."

I muttered skeptically, "Oh, well that's comforting." We all sat down on the rocks with Gobber as we tried to figure out what to do. We were stuck here with no food or water, only a few weapons, and worst of all, no transportation.

And then there was Gobber, sharpening his hook and humming to himself merrily. "Yeh never ferget yer first shipwreckâ€|" he sighed wistfully.

-.-.-.-.-

****Shorter chapter this time around, but we'll get to the juicier stuff in the next one!****

****Astrid: "Review please!" *after a moment, holds up axe threateningly*****

43. Foes Become Friends

****I'm on a freaking roll today! Two whole chapters in a matter of hours!****

****This time we start right off the bat with one of Gobber's tall tales. Gotta love those wild stories â€" another reason why I love this spin-off, just because of how unrealistic it is.****

****Megadracosaurus: Oh, you never know. I will when the opportunity presents itselfâ€| XD****

-.-.-.-.-

****Small Speck of Land, Many Years Ago (Gobber's POV)****

I was stranded on an island with only me broom. It was a very small island, so it was no wonder the Boneknapper found me again. He never forgave me fer takin' that treasure.

I looked around at the endless water. There was barely enough room on the island to lie down on the sand. A single palm tree stuck up from the speck of land. I had to admit â€" at least it was peaceful.

I used my broom to dust off a place for me to sit down, but before I could, there was a sudden clattering sound. I looked up at the cloud-covered sky to see the ugly grey monster dive down from the sky with its bone-sheathed wings. I ducked, and said wings ripped the tree in half like a Timberjack's.

The Boneknapper soared off for another go, but as it did so, it cut through the mist in the distance, allowing me to see through a small gap. From the look of it, it was another, bigger island. I grinned and prepared to swim.

There was another island, my only escape! But then, I was surrounded by bloodthirsty hammerhead sharks! I only had one chance, so I ran across the shark-infested waters.

Suddenly, hundreds of fins rose up from the water, and I found that my escape route was blocked by a wall of snapping jaws and glinting teeth. Up above, the Boneknapper prepared to strike again. So, I did what any brave Viking warrior would do â€" I leapt across the water, using the sharks as stepping stones!

Other sharks launched themselves at me with their terrible jaws wide open, but I beat them aside like nothing. Again and again I swatted the giant fish out of the way as I dashed across the water. "Someone fergot ta brush!" I sang as I scrubbed clean one shark's teeth. I

smashed it aside, even as the Boneknapper closed in and extended its talons.

I didn't think I was gonna make it. But then, from the depths of the ocean, leapt forth a giant hammerhead whale!

A mighty splash ensued behind me as I dove for the beach. I landed and whipped around, expecting to see the Boneknapper right on top of me. But instead, I glimpsed a mighty sea monster surge up from the deep and open its jaws wide to crunch down on the dragonâ€|

-.--.-.-.

****Dragon's Nest (Hiccup's POV)****

Once again, Gobber's story rendered us all speechless. It was a little more far-fetched than the other one, but still kind of believable. I mean, the ocean was a big place, so who really knew if hammerhead whales really resided in the depths? And who really knew if hammerhead sharks actually swam in packs?

However, this time Astrid joined the list of skeptical teenagers at this point. Fishlegs, though, still retained his enthusiasm.

"Whoa-ho-ho!" Fishlegs exclaimed. "Did the whale eat the Boneknapper?" Gobber chuckled and answered, "Almost, but the blasted dragon got away."

-.--.-.-.

****Jungle, Several Years Ago (Gobber's POV)****

Years later, he hunted me down again and chased me into the jungle. All I had was me trusty eggbeater. I cut through that thick brush as fast as a jungle cat. Still, the Boneknapper was right behind me.

I ran for my life, carving up the ferns and vines in front of me with my eggbeater. But behind me was the dreaded Boneknapper, wings tucked in and dashing after me like a prehistoric monster.

I cut through the last of the vines and came across a small, wild garden of beautiful flowers. "Ooh, azaleas!" I exclaimed, sniffing one. But the sound of thudding feet and rattling bones caused me to continue running, heading for the mighty volcano in the distance. The Boneknapper kept on my tail, crushing the flowers into dust as it ran.

I ran up the side of a volcano, an' courageously leapt across the fiery crater! Then, deep within the burning volcano, burst forth a giant hammerhead yak!

I found myself at the rim of the volcano, facing a huge bubbling pit of boiling lava. The Boneknapper rushed past me, leaping into the air and preparing to strike once more. Fearlessly, I jumped across the immense pool of lava even as the Boneknapper dove down from the sky like a ghost, wrapped in ash and smoke.

But then, the lava exploded, and a huge furry beast leapt out and

reached out for Boneknapper's tail with its hoofâ€|

-.-.-.-.-.

****Hel's Gate (Hiccup's POV)****

Now Snaketail was convinced that Gobber was just telling wild stories at this point. Even my faith in Gobber was beginning to dwindle. I mean, how tall could a tale get?

I was soon to find out.

"Okay, wait a minute," Tuff said. "You're saying, a giant hammerhead yak leapt out of the fiery volcano, and ate the Boneknapper?" His sister smirked and wiped her nose skeptically.

"Hah, yeh'd think so, wouldn't yeh," Gobber told him. "But the Boneknapper got away again. I knew that boney scoundrel would keep comin' after me."

I sighed, knowing that his tale would become a lot more unbelievable.

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****Snowy Mountains, Five Years Ago (Gobber's POV)****

So, I set up a bunch of traps and waited fer the beast.

I finished setting up the last of the bear traps and stood back to admire my work. I sat down on my stool and glared into the forest, taking out my guitar and playing as I waited. I was a pretty good musician in those days.

An' when he was ready, he charged! Then I ran like the wind, but the traps failed!

The Boneknapper lunged out of the forest, flapping its wings in an intimidating manner. I laughed mockingly and dashed through the forest, swerving around my traps. But although the Boneknapper stepped through each of the traps, the dragon was too fast, and the bear traps snapped at empty air.

I looked back in horror to see the beast still chasing me, then faced forward just in time to see a cliff looming ahead of me. I was trapped! The Boneknapper knew it, too, and leapt on me, clutching me in its talon.

Then, captured, I did what any brave Viking would do.

"HEEEEEELP!" I yelled, already knowing that I was probably doomed. "Let me go! What'll me wee little apprentice do without me?" The Boneknapper ignored me and opened its gaping mouth to finish me off.

The gods must have heard me prayers. It was Thor!

Suddenly, lightning flashed and thunder rumbled, and the mighty figure of Thor appeared above the clouds! "Ooooooh," I breathed in

awe.

He tossed a mighty thunderbolt!

Thor reared back and hurled a bolt of lightning that streaked down towards us. However, I was completely dismayed at how the lightning bolt didn't even hit the Boneknapper â€" instead, it sped down past the cliff and exploded on the ground, creating a deep crater.

"Huh," I said, unimpressed. "Yeh missed!" Thor held up a hand and cautioned, "Wait for itâ€|"

Then, from the center of the earth, blasted forthâ€| the hammerhead yak riding the hammerhead whale, being carried by a hammerhead eagle!

A huge brown shape sped up towards us. The giant bird released the whale into the air with a roar, and the whale blasted the yak off of its back with a spurt of water from its blowhole.

The yak landed in front of the Boneknapper and bashed it in the face with a hoof, stunning it and causing it to release me. The whale then dove down from the sky to finish it off, opening its mighty jaws wide. It crashed into the Boneknapper, sending it plummeting down with it. The eagle followed them, ready to snag the dragon in its claws.

I peered over the edge to watch them go. Then the whale turned around midair and gave me a happy whale-song, then raised its flipper in a salute. I saluted it back and waved in thanks.

-.--.-.-.

****Hel's Gate (Hiccup's POV)****

That did it.

"Whoa, the whale saluted you?" Fishlegs squealed. "Hah, can yeh believe it?" exclaimed Gobber, just as excited. "But the Boneknapper got away again! He found me on Berk, and â€" well, yeh know the rest."

Astrid punched me on the shoulder and gestured to Gobber. I sighed and approached him. "Gobber, you don't even have any proof that thing exists," I told him. He looked at me triumphantly and replied, "'Course I have proof! I still have the treasure â€" this stunning belt buckle! It was in the Viking's treasure chest, and it's been keepin' me pants up fer years!"

He showed us the shiny bone that was lashed to his pants. "It is stunning," Fishlegs agreed. I spoke up again, "Listen, Gobber? Instead of chasing down an imaginary dragon, we should figure out how to get home."

Gobber nodded and stood up. "Say no more. I hear yeh loud an' clear. I've got a plan." He pointed with his hook and asked in a chipper voice, "Now, who'd like ta be dragon bait?"

We all exchanged glances and stepped away from the hook. Fishlegs gulped as he was singled out.

A few minutes later, Fishlegs had been dressed up in a crude Gobber disguise â€" a small dragon's skull for a helmet, a rope for the mustache, and he was holding a talon bone as a hook. Gobber led him over to a pile of dragon bones, over which a giant ribcage he managed to hang.

"Uh, Gobber? Are you sure this is safe?" Fishlegs asked nervously. Gobber squinted at him, then nodded approval. "Ahh, safety's overrated," he said dismissively.

"Okay, here's the plan," he told the rest of us. "The Boneknapper wants me, right? He comes down that trail" â€" he pointed down a misty trail that wound deeper into the mountains of the Dragon's Nest â€" "sees Fishlegs, thinks it's me, rushes Fishlegs" â€" said boy squeaked in fear â€" "causing Phil to trip that bone, dropping that ribcage. And then we rush in, and finish him off once and for all!"

"Gobber, you are taking this way too far," Snaketail said. "Get it through your head â€" there is no such thing as the Boneknapper!" He waved a dismissive hand at her. "Wormsquat. Now, get into position."

We all ducked down behind the rocks, quietly arguing amongst ourselves. In fact, the argument was so heated, we never heard Fishlegs calling us until he yelled, "GUYS!"

We all responded with an impatient, "WHAT?!"

Then the clattering of bones reached our ears.

"It's right behind us, isn't it?" I asked dryly.

We turned around.

The thing was the biggest dragon we'd ever seen â€" besides the obvious exception. It spread its great, grey wings and stared down at us. Over its head, it wore a skull from another Boneknapper, it wore vertebrae down its back and ribs over its chest, and a club of femurs and other bones on its tail. It opened its mouth, and we braced ourselves for the piercing screech â€" but all that came out was a pathetic, almost inaudible squeal.

"Huh," Fishlegs muttered. "No roar."

But that didn't stop the monster, which blasted a huge beam of fire at us. "Okay, Gobber, we believe you!" Astrid said as we scrambled for cover, trying to escape the massive beast. It jumped into the air and swept its tail over the ground, causing a huge shockwave of dust, wind, and bones to send us flying into the bone pile.

The ribcage subsequently dropped on top of us, rendering us trapped. "Phil!" scolded Gobber. The Boneknapper advanced, gas forming in its throat. We hid behind the ribs as fire shot from its mouth, blasting through the gaps in the ribcage. "Find a happy place, find a happy place," Snotlout muttered to himself hysterically as he tried not to panic.

Then the colossal fossil tried to break its way in, snapping at the

ribs, swatting the cage with its tail, hopping all over us in its attempts to get at us. Fishlegs was screaming, Gobber was roaring challenges at the Boneknapper, but me â€" I had noticed something.

There was a tiny gap in the Boneknapper's neck armor, right over where I supposed its voice box would be. Glancing over at Gobber, I realized that the gap looked suspiciously like the shape Gobber's belt buckle took.

"Wait," I muttered. "It searches for the perfect bone to build its coat of armorâ€" Gobber! Take off your pants!"

He glanced over confusedly. "NO!" everyone else shrieked.

I hastened to explain. "Gobber, listen â€" Fishlegs was right! The Boneknapper is supposed to have a roar, but maybe he can't because the bone he needs is your belt buckle!"

Did the Boneknapper tilt its head ever so slightly as if to nod? But that question was ripped from my mind as it did the same thing to one of the ribs guarding us. "Gobber, please, you have to give it back!" Astrid said. "No way, it's mine!" he said stubbornly â€" right before the Boneknapper seized his peg leg in its jaws.

"Uh oh," Gobber muttered before he was flung into the air and shaken in all directions.

The Boneknapper relentlessly tossed him this way and that, trying to get him to give up. "Give him back his bone!" I called, but got a wailing "Nooooooooo!" in reply.

I repeated the order, my voice breaking from the sheer magnitude of the shout. "Nooooooooo!" he said again.

The Boneknapper flung him high into the air with a "Noooooooooo!" The defiant yell soon petered down and ended with, "â€"oh, all rightâ€" Gobber ripped off the bone holding his pants up and flung it down at the dragon.

By pure chance, it landed right where it was supposed to go. Gobber, on the other hand, landed in a pile of bones. The Boneknapper flexed its wings and shook its head, getting used to the addition of the final piece of armor.

Then it reared its head back and _screeched_.

Everyone clamped their hands over their ears as the sound tore through our very minds. Dust was swept off the ground in massive curtains that stung our eyes and impaired our vision. The agonizing wail seemed to last forever, and when it ended, my ears were still ringing.

The dragon bent its head down to Gobber's level and nuzzled him as a thank-you. His pants fell down subsequently, and we all looked away with various disgusted reactions. "That's gonna give me nightmaresâ€" I mumbled.

"Well, at least we have a ride home," Astrid smiled and gestured to Gobber and the Boneknapper. The massive dragon was on its back,

waving its talons in the air and wagging its deadly club of a tail. "Aren't you cute?" Gobber cooed, scratching it under the chin. "Yes yeh are! Yes yeh are!"

-.-.-.-.-

****Sky Over the Sea****

Its not every day you ride on a mythical dragon's back. The Boneknapper was big enough to fit twenty Vikings on it. It released a happy shriek as it flew clumsily over the ocean. Gobber was sitting behind its head with Phil, and the rest of us were on its back and tail.

"You know I never doubted him," I heard Snotlout say over Astrid's cheers. "I was always like, he was right."

Fishlegs was looking like he was going to explode in excitement. Snaketail and Ruffnut were standing up and clutching the spines on its back, long hair whipping in the wind. Tuffnut yowled, "OW! His tailbone's hurting my tailbone!"

The Boneknapper let out another happy call. "He sure seems joyful," I commented from my seat behind Gobber. "Legend does say that the Boneknapper's roar functions as its mating call," Fishlegs said matter-of-factly.

"Ahh, that's just a myth," Gobber chuckled " right before a series of shrieks sounded from right behind us.

We all turned around to see four other full-grown Boneknappers flying after us. "Uh oh," Gobber said. Phil bleated in fright.

I unconsciously looked down and squinted in response to a long, loud wail coming from the ocean. I rubbed my eyes and squinted again " was it just me, or was there a yak and a bird riding that whale?

I rubbed my eyes again, more frantically this time, as the whale looked up and saluted me. _That's it,_ I thought. _I'm sleeping for the rest of the day. I'm hallucinating from lack of sleep._

The four Boneknappers flew into formation behind us. "I think Stoick'll believe me now, eh?" Gobber laughed, as the isle of Berk suddenly rose up from the horizon in front of us.

-.-.-.-.-

****Open Ocean (No POV)****

The whale, yak, and eagle watched the quintet of dragons fly off over the ocean. "Well, they've finally made up for that whole treasure business," the yak rumbled. "Took them long enough," the eagle squawked.

"Fred, Miranda, stop arguin'!" the whale said. "We're late for lunch at Thor's palace!" The two animals nodded in agreement. "Swim on then, Moby!" Miranda said, and the three of them swam off.

-.-.-.-.-

****Berk Village (Hiccup's POV)****

The five Boneknappers landed in various locations around the plaza. Gobber and the rest of us hopped off the largest and grinned at Stoick. "We're back!" he called cheerfully. "Ya miss us?"

All Stoick could do was open his mouth, but no sound came out.

-.-.-.-.-..

****"Ahh, safety's overrated." Best. Gobber. Quote. EVER. What's your favorite Gobber quote, readers?****

****Hammerhead sharks actually swim in packs, by the way.****

****I decided to give the whale, the eagle, and the yak a last cameo just for kicks, and I might even have the trio make another appearance at the end of the story. You never know!****

****Gobber: "Review, ya scurvy scallywags! Or I'll sic me Boneknapper on yeh!"****

44. Author's Note by Cottonmouth25

****Well, greetings and many great hellos. This is Cottonmouth25 with an important message for you readers.****

****School's finally out for me, and I passed my Math exam with a staggering 98%. Hold your applause.****

****However, I've come to deliver this important message. And that is - you probably won't be seeing very many "Legends are Born" updates.****

****The fact is, I've become obsessed with writing two Pokemon fanfictions I'm working on right now, and also finishing my novel. As I said in an earlier chapter of "Legends are Born", I'm losing interest in this fanfic. As one of my reviewers pointed out, it's probably the lack of original content in this story, and he/she/it's probably right. I'm bored of watching the Riders of Berk episodes over and over again to get this done.****

****I haven't even started writing the next chapter because of all this, but I am going to try my best to start it and get it published the second I finish, no delays.****

****I haven't been in the HTTYD groove these days, but I'm going to watch the movie again tonight and read a whole load of fanfictions in order to get me back into it. I want to get this fanfic done, and I certainly don't want it to sit here and rot for the rest of its life.****

****I sincerely, sincerely apologize for this inconvenience, readers. I'll update as soon as I possibly can with the next chapter.****

****~Cottonmouth25 (Cm25)****

End
file.